



# NAVIGATING NEOLIBERALISM IN THE ACADEMY, NONPROFITS, AND BEYOND

## Social Service or Social Change?

by Paul Kivel

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Can we provide social service *and* work for social change, or do our efforts to provide human services maintain or even strengthen social inequality?

I first began thinking about this issue when the Oakland Men's Project was established in 1979. At that time, we were responding to women in the domestic violence, sexual assault prevention, and child sexual assault prevention movements. When asked what we could do as men they said that they had their hands full dealing with the survivors of male violence and trying to get institutions to respond to these issues. But we were told that since it was men who were the perpetrators of most of the violence, men were needed to address other men.

Many men in the country who heard that initial call started batterers' intervention programs, working with men individually and in small groups to help them stop their violent behaviors. At the Oakland Men's Project we were involved in these efforts, yet we felt that in order to end male violence we needed more than groups for individual men who were violent. We committed to build an organization which, through community prevention and education, could contribute to ending violence, not just "reforming" individual perpetrators.

Nearly 30 years later, I look around and see many shelters and services for survivors of domestic violence, but no large-scale movement to end male violence. I see many batterers' intervention programs, but few men involved in challenging sexism. The loss of vision that narrowed the focus of men's work reflects a change that occurred in other parts of the movement to end violence, as activists who set out to change the institutions perpetrating violence settled into service jobs helping people cope. Why does this narrowing of focus continue to happen in so much of our community work?

*Social service work* addresses the needs of individuals reeling from the personal and devastating impact of institutional systems of exploitation and violence. *Social change work* challenges the root causes of the exploitation and violence. In my travels throughout the United States, I talk with many service providers, more and more of whom are saying to me, "We could continue doing what we are doing for another hundred years and the levels of violence would not change." I meet more and more people who are running batterers' programs who say, "We are only dealing with a minute number of the men who are violent and are having little impact on the systems which perpetuate male violence."

We need to provide services for those most in need, for those trying to survive, for those barely making it. We also need to work for social change so that we create a society in which our institutions and organizations are equitable and just, and all people are safe, adequately fed and sheltered, well-educated, afforded safe and decent jobs, and empowered to participate in the decisions that affect their lives.

While there is some overlap between social service provision and social change work, the two do not necessarily go readily together. In our violent world, the needs and numbers of survivors are never ending, and the tasks of funding, staffing, and developing resources for our organizations to meet those needs are difficult, poorly supported, and even actively undermined by those with power and wealth in our society.

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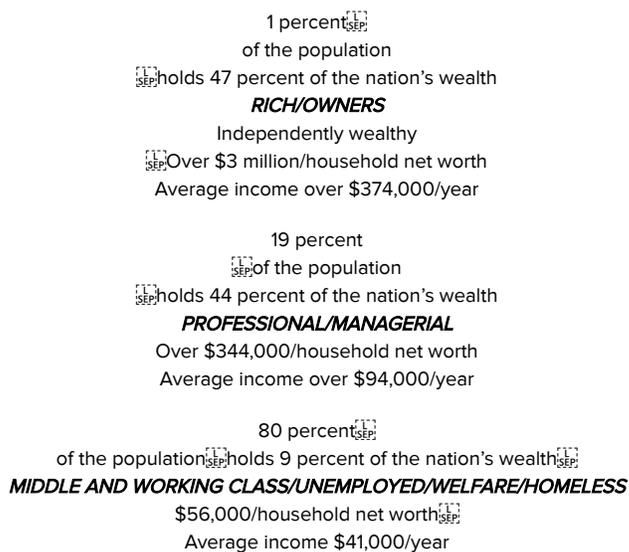
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Although some groups are both working for social change and providing social services, there are many more groups providing social services that are not working for social change. In fact, many social service agencies may be intentionally or inadvertently working to maintain the status quo. After all, the non-profit industrial complex (NPIC) wouldn't exist without a lot of people in desperate straits. The NPIC provides jobs; it provides opportunities for professional development. It enables those who do the work to feel good about what we do and about our ability to help individuals survive in the system. It gives a patina of caring and concern to the ruling class which funds the work. While there is always the risk of not securing adequate funding, there is a greater risk that if we did something to really rock the boat and address the roots of the problems we would lose whatever funding we'd already managed to secure. In this essay I will explore the rise of this paradox and what activists might do to combat the deleterious effects imposed by the NPIC on our work for lasting social change.

### The Economic Pyramid

To get to the root of the social service/social change dilemma we must examine our current political/economic structure, which looks like the pyramid below. In the United States 1 percent of the population controls about 47 percent of the net financial wealth,<sup>[1]</sup> and the next 19 percent of the population controls another 44 percent. That leaves 80 percent of the population struggling to gain a share of just 9 percent of the remaining financial wealth. The result is that large numbers of people in the United States spend most of our time trying to get enough money to feed, house, clothe, and otherwise support ourselves and our families, and many end up without adequate housing, food, health care, work, or educational opportunities.

#### The US Economic Pyramid



The economic pyramid<sup>[2]</sup> is only a rough instrument for measuring income distribution, as there are many gradations it overlooks. Nevertheless, it offers a snapshot of devastating social and economic inequality. Most notably, among the 80 percent at the base of the pyramid, there is a vast difference in the standard of living between those nearer the top and those near or on the bottom. And a substantial number of people (nearly 20 percent of the population) actually live *below* the bottom of the pyramid with negative financial wealth (that is, more debt than assets).

#### Questions To Ask Yourself

*Where did you grow up on the pyramid, or where was your family of origin on the pyramid?*

*Where are you now?*

Historically, the United States has always had a steep economic pyramid with a large concentration of wealth in the two richest classes. But in the last 27 years, since the beginning of the Reagan administration in 1980, the distance between the ruling and managerial classes and the rest of the population has increased dramatically. Class mobility has decreased, and the economic well-being of the poorest 80 percent has substantially deteriorated. Those on the bottom of the pyramid have fared the worst. During this period, most of those in the top 20 percent have thrived because they have substantial assets providing them with social and economic security as well as access to power, resources, education, leisure, and health care. Of this group, those at the very top have consolidated their power and privilege.

I refer to the top 1 percent as the ruling class because members of this class hold positions of power as corporate executives, politicians, policy makers, and funders for political campaigns, policy research, public policy debates, and media campaigns. The ruling class maintains the power and money to influence, and often to determine, the decisions that affect our lives, including where jobs will be located and what kinds of jobs they will be; where environmental toxins are dumped; how much money is allocated to build schools or prisons and where they will be built; and which health care, reproductive rights, civil rights, and educational issues will be discussed and who defines the terms of these discussions. In other words, when we look at positions of power in the US, we will almost always see members or representatives of the ruling class. We cannot call our country a democracy when 1 percent of the population controls nearly half, and the top 20 percent controls 91 percent of the wealth and the access to power that wealth produces. This vast concentration of wealth produces the conditions of impoverishment, ill health, violence, and marginalization that necessitate the services so many of us provide.

While the ruling class might not all sit down together in a room and decide policy, members of this class *do* go to school together, vacation together, live together, and share ideas through various newspapers and magazines, conferences, think tanks, spokespeople, and research and advocacy groups. They *do* meet in Congress, corporate offices, foundation board rooms, elite law firms, and in national and international gatherings to make significant social, political, and economic decisions for their collective benefit. Perhaps most importantly, members of this class sit together on interlocking boards of directors of major corporations and wield great power on corporate decisions. Because multinational corporations have larger economies, greater security forces, and more political clout than many states and even than most countries, those who sit on boards of corporate directors collectively wield tremendous influence on political decisions through lobbying, government appointments, corporate funded research, interpersonal connections, and advisory appointments, as well as the power they wield through direct economic and political intervention in local communities and in the affairs of other countries.<sup>[3]</sup>

The next 19 percent of the economic pyramid, the professional/managerial class, are people who work for the ruling class. Members of this class may not gain the same level of power and financial rewards as people at the very top, but their work provides the research, managerial skills, expertise, technological development and other resources which the ruling class needs to maintain and justify its monopolization of political and economic power. This class also carries out the direct management of the largest public, private, and non-profit enterprises in the country.

But it is the majority of the population, the bottom 80 percent, which produces the social wealth benefiting those at the top. Laboring in factories, fields, classrooms, homes, sweatshops, prisons, hospitals, restaurants, and small businesses, the individuals comprising this enormous class keep our society functioning and productive. Meanwhile, entire communities remain entrapped in endless cycles of competition, scarcity, violence, and insecurity that those at the top are largely protected from.

Certainly the gradations within the bottom 80 percent (middle class, working class, and the dependent and working poor) produce additional security and benefits for some of its members, specifically those in the middle class, those who are white, or male, or citizens, or not incarcerated, or straight, or able-bodied, and keep many of us blaming and attacking those like—or even worse off than—us, rather than looking to the economic system and the concentration of wealth at the top of the pyramid as the source of our problems. The role of the NPIC is to keep our attention away from those in power and to manage and control our efforts to survive in the bottom of the pyramid. These functions are necessary to maintain the concentration of wealth and power because people have always resisted economic and political inequality and exploitation.

People on the bottom rungs of the pyramid are constantly organizing to gain more power and access to resources. Most of the progressive social change we have witnessed in US history resulted from the work of disenfranchised groups of people who have fought for access to education, jobs, health care, civil rights, reproductive rights, safety, housing, and a safe, clean environment. In our recent history, we can point to the civil rights movement, women's liberation movements, lesbian and gay liberation movements, disability rights movement, unions, and thousands of local struggles for progressive social change.<sup>[4]</sup>

### Questions To Ask Yourself

*Are you part of any group which has organized to gain for itself more access to voting rights, jobs, housing, education, or an end to violence or exploitation—such as workers, women, people of color, people with disabilities, seniors, youth, lesbians, gays, bisexuals and trans people, or people whose religion is not Christian?*

*How have those struggles benefited your life?<sup>11/11/2017</sup> How have those struggles been resisted by the ruling class?<sup>11/11/2017</sup> What is the current state of those movements you have been closest to?*

### The Buffer Zone

People in the ruling class have always wanted to prevent people at the bottom of the pyramid from organizing for power in order to maintain the power, control, and, most importantly, wealth that they have accumulated. At the same time, they have generally wanted to avoid directly managing people on the bottom

of the pyramid. To maintain this separation and to prevent themselves from becoming the objects of people's anger, they have used legal, educational, and professional systems to create a network of occupations, careers, and professions to deal directly with the rest of the population. This buffer zone comprises all occupations that carry out the agenda of the ruling class without requiring ruling class presence or visibility. Some of the people employed in the buffer zone fall into the 19 percent section of the pyramid; however, most have jobs that put them somewhere near the top of the bottom 80 percent. These jobs give them a little more economic security and just enough power to make decisions about other people's lives—those who have even less than they do. The buffer zone has three primary functions.

The first function is *taking care* of people at the bottom of the pyramid. If it were a literal free-for-all for that 9 percent of financial wealth allocated to the poor/working and lower-middle-classes, there would be (particularly in the eyes of those who benefit most from the economic pyramid) "chaos": many more people would be dying in the streets (as happened during the Depression, for example) instead of invisibly in homes, hospitals, prisons, rest homes, and homeless shelters. Individual, hidden deaths and personal tragedies caused by AIDS, cancer, occupational dangers, environmental pollution, unsafe consumer products, diabetes, heart disease, asthma, family violence, lack of health care, homelessness, poverty, discrimination, and neglect keep people from adding up the total cost of the concentration of wealth. There are many occupations—social welfare workers, nurses, teachers, counselors, case workers, advocates for various groups—to either manage or sort out (generally based on class, race, gender, immigration status, and other social categories) which people get how much of the 9 percent and to provide minimal services for those in need. These occupations are performed mostly by women and are primarily identified as women's work.

Taking care of those in need is valuable and honorable work, and most people do it with generosity and good intentions. But it also serves to mask the inadequate distribution of jobs, food, housing, and other valuable resources. When temporary shelter becomes a substitute for permanent housing, emergency food a substitute for a decent job, tutoring a substitute for adequate public schools, and free clinics a substitute for universal health care, we have shifted our attention from the redistribution of wealth to the temporary provision of social services to keep people alive.

The second function of jobs in the buffer zone is *keeping hope alive* by distributing opportunities for a few people to become better off financially. There are still many people who believe the myth that anyone can make it in this society—that there is a level playing field. To keep that myth believable there have to be examples of people who have "made it"—have gone to college from a poor family, moved from homelessness to stable housing, found a job despite having few "marketable" skills. Some of those who have buffer-zone jobs determine which people will be the lucky ones to receive jobs and job training, a college education, housing allotments, or health care. Those who gain access to these benefits are held up as examples that the system works and serve as proof that if one just worked hard, followed the rules, and didn't challenge the social order or status quo, they, too, would get ahead and gain a few benefits from the system. Sometimes getting ahead in this context means getting a job in the buffer zone and becoming one of the people who hands out the benefits.

When the staff of a housing agency enables three families out of a hundred in a community to get into affordable housing, or a youth program enables a handful of students out of hundreds in a neighborhood to get into college or into job training programs, buffer-zone organizations can honor the achievements of those who have made it, validate that the system does work for those who play their cards right, and pat themselves on the back for the good work they have done in helping a few succeed. At the same time, by pointing to those few who succeed, they provide a social rationale for blaming those who didn't make it because they did not work or study hard enough. The focus on the individual achievements of a few can distract us from looking at why there is not enough affordable housing, educational opportunities, and jobs for everyone.

The final function of jobs in the buffer zone is to maintain the system by *controlling* those who want to make changes. Because people at the bottom keep fighting for change, people at the top need social mechanisms that keep people in their place in the family, in schools, in the neighborhood, and even in other countries. Police, security guards, prison wardens, highway patrol, sheriff's departments, national guard, soldiers, deans and administrators, immigration officials, and fathers, in their role to provide discipline in the family—these are all traditionally male roles in the buffer zone designed to keep people in their place in the hierarchy.<sup>[5]</sup>

### Co-opting Social Change

During the latter half of the 20th century, multiple groups were demanding—and, in some cases, gaining—crucial changes in US society, such as better access to jobs, education, and health care. The ruling classes recognized the need for new strategies to suppress dissent among the oppressed and to curtail demands for structural change.

One strategy used by the ruling class to maintain the social order has been to fund social welfare programs through government and non-profit agencies. This creates the appearance that the government is responsive, creating an illusion of "progress" while recruiting buffer-zone agents from the groups of people demanding change of the system. But more often than not, the programs are severely underfunded, overregulated; more, they merely provide services, without addressing the structural issues as required to

actually eliminate the injustice or inequality motivating people to organize in the first place. In addition, hiring community leaders into paid program and administration jobs separates them from their communities by making them beholden to the governmental and non-profit bureaucracies that employ them, rather than to the communities they are trying to serve.

An example of how this process of co-optation works can be seen in the 1960s civil rights movement, a grassroots struggle led by African Americans for full civil rights, for access to power and resources, and for the end of racial discrimination and racist violence. Significantly, the civil rights movement did put pressure on the government, those in middle management and academic jobs, corporations, and non-profits to hire some African Americans which has created a small Black middle class. But while those struggles succeeded in dismantling legalized segregation, many forms of structural racism still exist and the broader goals of political and economic justice have largely remained unfulfilled.

Indeed, the issue of racism is now frequently “addressed” in our social institutions by a multiracial group of professionals who work as diversity or multicultural trainers, consultants, advisors, and educators. Although the ruling class is still almost exclusively white and most African Americans, Native Americans, and other people of color remain at the bottom of the economic pyramid, conservatives and the media advance the illusion that substantial change has occurred because there are a few very high-profile wealthy African Americans and a larger Black middle class—“proof” that any person of color has the opportunity to become rich and powerful if they work hard enough.

The civil rights movement is not the only arena where demands for social change have been co-opted by the ruling class. Another example is the battered women’s movement, the organizing by battered and formerly battered women for shelter, safety, resources, and an end to male violence. Again, gains were made in identifying the issue, in improving the response of public institutions to incidents of male violence, and in increasing services to battered women. But systematic, large-scale efforts to mobilize battered women and end male violence have not been attempted. Instead, we have a network of (still largely inadequate) social services to attend to the immediate needs of battered women, and a new network of buffer-zone jobs in shelters and advocacy organizations to administer to those needs.

Neither the roots of racism nor the roots of male violence can be addressed by the present network of narrowly focused social services or the new cadres of professionals administering to the needs of those on the bottom of the pyramid. In fact, I would argue that in combating racism and male violence through the engines of the NPC, we have lost some ground because we now have more controlling elements—more police, security guards, and immigration officials than ever before monitoring, interfering with, and criminalizing the family lives of people of color, as well as poor and working-class white people. We need to examine the impact of our work very carefully to make sure that it does not perpetuate a narrow social service perspective and that we, ourselves, have not been co-opted by the jobs and privileges we have been given in the non-profit industrial complex.

#### Questions to ask yourself

*What are the historical roots of the work that you do? <sup>11</sup> <sup>SEP</sup> What were your motivations or intentions when you began doing this work?*

*Who are you in solidarity with in the pyramid? That is, who would you like to support through the work that you do—people at the top of the pyramid, people in the buffer zone, or people at the bottom?*

*Who actually benefits from the work that you do?*

*Are there ways in which, through your work, family role, or role in the community, you have come to enforce the status quo or train young people for their role in it?*

#### The Role of the Non-Profit

The ruling class created the non-profit legal status primarily to establish foundations so they could park their wealth where it was protected from income and estate taxes. The foundations allow them to retain control over their family wealth. The trade-off they made with the government was a legal mandate to distribute a very small percentage of each foundation’s income every year for the public good. A vast network of non-profits was set up to receive and distribute this money. The non-profit tax category grants substantial economic benefits to the ruling class: even today, most charitable, tax-exempt giving from the ruling class (either as direct donations or through foundations) directly benefits those at the top of the economic pyramid by going to institutions and programs such as ruling class think tanks and foundations, ruling class cultural institutions (e.g., museums, operas, the theater, art galleries), elite schools and private hospitals.

In 2000, non-profits controlled over \$1.59 trillion in financial assets and had revenue of over \$822 billion.<sup>[6]</sup> Non-profits also control significant amounts of federal and state monies through contracts for the provision of public services such as health care, education, housing, employment training, and jobs. The ruling class, through the non-profit sector, controls billions of dollars of private and government money ostensibly earmarked for the public good, but subject to virtually no public control.

The non-profit industrial complex was not always so huge. During the civil rights period, when there were large-scale marches, sit-ins, protests, and demonstrations, policy makers at the largest foundations decided that they should fund some of the more moderate leadership in the Black community both to elicit their cooperation and to provide some measure of services that might lessen dissent. Money began to be funneled into “acceptable” (that is, non-radical) community groups as a way to forestall and co-opt further protest and to steer public policy towards the provision of individual services.<sup>[7]</sup> Until that period, most activists and community members working for social change were not employed by non-profits. Although some were paid for their work, most worked voluntarily in neighborhood associations, unions, church groups, cultural and other civic organizations.

During the 1970s, the NPIC increased dramatically as a response to the continued protests of anti-war, women’s liberation, queer liberation, and other social movements. Soon it became common for people to be paid to do “good work” by providing services for people in the community. Non-profit management became a career path and many subspecialties of non-profit programming were developed such as youth work, violence prevention work, senior services, domestic violence services, housing services, and job training programs.

Organizations on the right also used the non-profit sector to advance their agenda. But as Jean Hardisty, quoting labor activist and author Beth Shulman, notes, “Right-wing funders invested in the building blocks or skeletal structure of their movement, such as publications, research centers, think tanks, and academic fellowships and chairs designated for rightist scholars, campus organizations, and youth groups.” Hardisty goes on to comment,

Instead of underwriting movement-building, liberal and progressive foundations funded social service programs and advocacy programs that promised to ensure better living conditions and promote equality and tolerance. Much of this funding could be classified as humanitarian aid.... Unable to ignore need and suffering, liberal and progressive funders lacked the ideological single-mindedness of the right’s funders. The right’s funders got greater political mileage for each dollar invested, because the organizations and individuals funded focused on a strategic plan for seizing power.<sup>[8]</sup>

Beginning in the 1980s with the Reagan-era cutbacks in social services, many non-profits experienced even more pressure to provide basic human needs services to growing numbers of people. As they became completely reliant on private donors, private foundations, or dwindling amounts of government dollars to cope with ever-increasing demands, many non-profits began spending inordinate amounts of time writing proposals, designing programs to meet foundation guidelines, tracking and evaluating programs to satisfy foundations, or soliciting private donations through direct-mail appeals, house parties, benefits, and other fundraising techniques. Their work had to be developed and then presented in such a way as to meet the guidelines and approval of the ruling class and its representatives.

Today, funders generally support non-profit programming that fills gaps in the government’s provision of services, extends outreach to underserved groups, and stresses collaboration among social services providers to use money and other resources more efficiently; that is, to stretch less money further to cover greater need. Although many took jobs in this sector to avoid working in the corporate sector and to work in solidarity with those at the bottom of the pyramid, the professionalization and corporatization of the non-profit sector, coupled with the expanding needs of the population and decreasing government funding, meant that many became disillusioned and burned-out from the demands of the work.

### **Co-opting Community Leadership**

The ruling class co-opts leaders from our communities by providing them with jobs in non-profits and in government agencies, hence realigning their perceived self-interest with maintaining the system (i.e., maintaining their jobs). Whether they are social welfare workers, police officers, domestic violence shelter workers, diversity consultants, therapists, or security guards, their jobs and status are dependent on their ability to keep the system functioning—and to suppress potential opposition from community members—no matter how illogical, exploitative, and unjust the system is. The existence of these jobs serves to convince people that tremendous inequalities of wealth are natural and inevitable. Institutionalizing soup kitchens leads people to expect that inevitably there will be people without enough to eat; establishing permanent homeless shelters leads people to think that it is normal for there not to be enough affordable housing. In his discussion of co-optation, sociologist Raymond Breton makes clear that integrating the leadership of our communities into the bureaucracies of the buffer zone separates the interests of those leaders from the needs of the community:

Co-optation is a process through which the policy orientations of leaders are influenced and their organizational activities channeled. It blends the leader’s interests with those of an external organization. In the process, ethnic leaders and their organizations become active in the state-run interorganizational system; they become participants in the decision-making process as

advisors or committee members. By becoming somewhat of an insider the co-opted leader is likely to identify with the organization and its objectives. The leader's point of view is shaped through the personal ties formed with authorities and functionaries of the external organization.

[9]

Ruling class policies, including development of the non-profit sector and support for social services, have led to the co-optation of substantial numbers of well-intentioned people. In this group I include all of us whose intention is to "help" people at the bottom of the pyramid, but whose work, in practice, helps perpetuate their inability to change the circumstances which force them to need this assistance to survive the conditions of our society in the first place. Ultimately, our efforts end up benefiting the ruling class by actively supporting the current exploitative structure. Rather than helping others, we need to develop ways to work together to create community power.

#### Questions to Ask Yourself

*Do you work in a government-funded or non-profit organization?*

*Where does the funding come from for your work?*

*In what ways does funding influence how the work gets defined?*

*How much time do you spend responding to the needs of funders as opposed to the needs of the people you serve?*

*In what ways has the staff of your program become separated from the people they serve because of the following: the demands of funders; the status and pay of staff; the professionalization of the work; the role of your organization in the community; the interdependence of your work with governmental agencies, businesses, foundations, or other non-profit organizations?*

*In what ways have your ties with governmental and community agencies separated you from the people you serve?*

*In what ways have those ties limited your ability to be "contentious"—to challenge the powers that be and their undemocratic and abusive practices?*

#### Getting Ahead or Getting Together?

Getting ahead is the mantra of capitalism. Getting ahead is what we try to do in our lives. Getting ahead is what we urge our children to do. Getting ahead is how many of us, including activists for social change, define success. Many people in the US believe that it is the responsibility of our society not to guarantee material security for all, but merely to ensure that everyone has an "equal opportunity" to get ahead. Those who are deserving, the myth continues, will get ahead; the rest will fail because of their own laziness, ignorance, or lack of discipline. Ironically, some of the recent political struggles organized by women, queer communities, people with disabilities, people of color, and recent immigrants have become defined as struggles for equal opportunity, for everyone to be able to compete to get ahead.

But in a pyramid-shaped economic system, only a few can get ahead. Many are doomed to stay exactly where they are at the bottom of the pyramid, or even to fall behind. With so much wealth concentrated in the top of the pyramid there are not enough jobs, not enough housing, not enough health care, and not enough resources devoted to education for most people to get ahead. In this economic system, equal opportunity for some groups inevitably means more exploitation of others. If we are only fighting for equal opportunity—to eliminate discrimination and level the playing field—we will still end up with a huge concentration of wealth and power in the ruling class and not enough resources for the rest of us to meet our needs. We need to engage in battles against specific kinds of exploitation, exclusion, marginalization, discrimination, and violence while *simultaneously* engaging in a longer-term struggle for a redistribution of wealth and power.

How does the system change? How do people gain access to money, jobs, education, housing, and other resources? Historically, change happens when people get together. In fact, we have a long history of people getting together for social change, like the civil rights and women's movements I mentioned earlier in the article. Each of these efforts involved people identifying common goals, figuring out how to work together and support one another, and coming up with strategies for forcing organizational and institutional change. When people get together, they build community by establishing projects, organizations, friendships, connections, coalitions, alliances, and an understanding of differences. Identifying common goals, supporting each other, working for organizational and institutional change, building community—these are the elements of creating a better world and fighting against the agenda of the ruling class. These activities put us into a contentious relationship to ruling class power.<sup>[10]</sup>

Those of us who are working for progressive social change must do that work subversively. We must make strategic decisions about what the fundamental contradictions are in the system and how we can work together with others to expose and organize around those contradictions. We can use our resources, knowledge, and status as social service providers to educate, agitate, and to support organizing for social change. We can refuse to be used as buffer-zone agents against our communities. Instead, we can come

together in unions, coalitions, organizing projects, alliances, networks, support and advocacy groups and a multitude of other forms of action against the status quo.

Many of us are doing work which is defined as providing social services. People in our communities need the services and those of us who are providers need the work. Others do non-service providing work. All of our work is situated within the economic pyramid, and in whatever part of the economy we find ourselves, we have a choice. Either we can go along with a ruling class agenda dictated through grant proposals, donors, foundations, government agencies, “best practices,” quantified evaluations, standards, and traditional policies, or we can take on the more risky work of engaging in consciousness raising, organizing, organizational and institutional critique, and mobilization for change. We are doing subversive work that is not within buffer-zone job descriptions when, although we are paid to provide social services to help people get ahead, our work supports people’s efforts to get together with others for greater collective power.

The problem is not with providing social services. Many radical groups, such as the Black Panthers and the Zapatistas, have provided social services as a tool for organizing. The problem comes when *all* our time and energy is diverted toward social services to the detriment of long-term social change. Clearly there is a tremendous difference between helping people get ahead individually and mobilizing buffer-zone resources to help people get together, a difference activists working within the NPIC should be mindful of in thinking about whether we are empowering people to work for social change at the same time we are providing them with social services.

#### Questions to Ask Yourself

*Is the primary goal of the work you do to help people get ahead or to help them get together?*

*How do you connect people to others in their situation?<sup>11</sup> How do you nurture and develop leadership skills in the people you serve?*

*How do you ensure that they represent themselves in the agency and other levels of decision making that affect their lives?*

*Do you provide them with information not only related to their own needs, but about how the larger social/political/economic system works to their disadvantage?*

*Do you create situations in which they can experience their personal power, their connection to others, and their ability to work together for change?*

*Do you help people understand and feel connected to the ongoing history of people’s struggles to challenge violence, exploitation, and injustice?*

#### Domestic Violence

Let’s look at domestic violence work as an example. If we accept the dominant paradigm that frames domestic violence as an interpersonal issue and the result of a breakdown in the normative heterosexual nuclear family, and views battered women as victims, that framework will lead us to try to protect the “victims” from further violence, provide them with services, and try to help them get ahead (and, even better, eventually into a healthy heterosexual nuclear family). We will treat them individually, as clients, and hold the people (primarily men) who beat them individually accountable for their violence through stronger criminal justice sanctions and batterers’ groups. We will try to help survivors escape battering relationships and to move forward in their lives. We will be advocates for more services, better services, culturally competent services, multilingual services, and we will advocate for strong and effective sanctions against men who are batterers. We will measure our success by how many battered women we served, and our success stories will be about how individual women were able to escape the violence of abusive families and get on with their lives. Our advocacy success stories will be about how various communities of women were provided better services and how batterers were either locked-up or transformed.

Rather than accept this social service (and racist, sexist, and heterosexist) framework, however, we could understand family violence (in both heterosexual and queer families) as a direct result of economic inequality, colonization, and other forms of state violence, and patriarchal and heterosexual norms—and that, in particular, women who are battered are caught in cycles that are the result of systematic exploitation, disempowerment, and isolation. This analysis would further acknowledge the structural forces that keep women in battering relationships: community tolerance for male violence, lack of well-paying jobs, lack of decent childcare and affordable housing, and, most of all, their isolation from one another and from the information and resources they need to come together to effect change. As organizers and resource providers, we would provide organizational and structural support for battered women to organize on their own behalf. We would not be working *for* battered women; we would be working *with* them. “They” would be “us”—battered women would be in leadership in the movement to end violence against women, holding the jobs that currently many non-battered women do. We would measure success by the strength of our programs for leadership development and the community response to domestic violence. We would work for changes in the economic, educational, penal/law enforcement (including immigration law), military, and social service institutions which condone, encourage, or perpetuate violence against women and keep women trapped in abusive relationships. Our success stories would be about how battered women became leaders, educators, and organizers, and how communities of people came together to develop strategies and wield power.

Whether we are domestic violence workers or other types of workers in the non-profit industrial complex, even with the best of intentions, it is easy to be co-opted by a ruling class agenda. The buffer-zone strategy of the ruling class works very smoothly, so smoothly that many of us don't notice that we are encouraged to feel good about helping a small number of individuals get ahead, while large numbers of people remain exploited, abused, and disenfranchised. It works so smoothly that we often don't notice that we have shifted from helping people get together to helping ourselves and our families get ahead. Some of us have stopped imagining that we can end domestic violence and have, instead, built ourselves niches in the edifice of social services for battered women or for batterers. The only way to avoid settling into patterns that guard ruling class dominance is through accountability to grassroots community struggles led by people at the bottom of the pyramid.

**Questions To Ask Yourself if You Work In A Domestic Violence Agency (If not, adapt the questions to reflect the work you do)**

*Can you imagine an end to domestic violence? <sup>11</sup>What do you think it will take?*

*Does the work that you do contribute to ending domestic violence? How?*

*How are battered women seen in your agency?*

*Are you providing social service and/or are you working for social change?*

*Are you helping battered women see that they are not alone, their problems not unique, their struggles interrelated?*

*Are you helping them come together for increased consciousness, resource sharing, and empowerment?*

**Accountability**

Even if it is not possible to change the system from within, an individual's actions within the system do matter. We can accept or reject, promote or hinder the state's agenda.

—Taiaiake Alfred<sup>[11]</sup>

So the question is, how do we maintain a critical transformative edge to our politics when we are building that politics in an organizational environment that is shaped by institutions outside of our community that don't necessarily want to see us survive on the terms that we are defining for ourselves?

—Tamara Jones<sup>[12]</sup>

As Alfred and Jones note, relationships between those working in the buffer zone and those in the community are complex and often difficult because of the ruling class's use of the buffer zone to co-opt both social change movements and leaders drawn from those struggles. Only a "critical transformative edge" from those in the community will prevent co-optation.

How do we know if we are being co-opted into contributing to a ruling class agenda and just providing social service, or if we are truly helping people get together? We cannot know by ourselves. We cannot know just from some people telling us that we are doing a good job or even telling us that we are making a difference. We cannot know by whether we feel good about what we do. Popularity, status, good feelings, positive feedback—our institutions and communities provide these to many people engaged in immoral, unethical, dangerous, exploitative, abusive, and illegal activities.

As a member of the buffer zone, whether by job function or economic position, the key question we must confront is this: "To whom are we accountable?" Since our work occurs in an extremely stratified and unequal economic hierarchy, and in an increasingly segregated and racially polarized society, we can begin to answer this question by analyzing the effects of our work on communities at the bottom of the pyramid. Are we perpetuating inequality or promoting social justice? Are we raising awareness of the roots of our social, political, and economic problems? With whom? How many are we reaching? Are they more powerful and able to develop more creative strategies as a result? Are we providing information, resources, and skills for people to get together? Are they able to be more politically effective as a result? What impact do we see from the work we are doing? If we keep doing what we are doing what impact will there be in 5 years? 10 years? 25 years? These are some of the questions we can be asking about our work.

Wherever we are within the economic pyramid, whatever work we are doing, it is possible to work for social justice. It is possible to more effectively serve the interests of the poor and working class, people of color and women, lesbians, gay men, and bisexual people, and people with disabilities. But doing so is challenging. It is easy to forget that we are only able to work inside non-profits, schools, and other social service organizations because so many people organized from the outside as part of the civil rights movement, the women's movement, the queer liberation movement, and disability rights movement. As we become dependent on this work for our livelihood, professionalized, and caught up in the demands of doing the work, there is a strong tendency for us to become ever more disconnected from the everyday political struggles in our communities

for economic, racial, and gender-based justice, for an end of various forms of violence and for collective power—those social justice issues which our work originally grew out of.

None of us can stay connected to social justice organizing and true to social justice values while working in isolation, inside of a non-profit organization. Our work is part of a much wider network of individuals and organizations working for justice from outside of the non-profit industrial complex. To make effective decisions about our own work we need to be accountable to those groups and take direction from their actions and issues. This accountability then becomes a source of connection that breaks down isolation and increases our effectiveness as social justice activists.

In closing, here are several suggestions for thinking about accountability to grassroots communities and struggles for social justice. I offer six questions we should ask ourselves in the current political context.

***Who supervises your work?*** I don't mean who employs you or hires or funds you, although these are important considerations in a conservative political climate when jobs are scarce. Who are the grassroots activists who advise you and review your work? If you are a male anti-violence activist, it is particularly important that you be accountable to women who are doing different kinds of anti-sexist organizing. If you are white, it is critical for you to be accountable to people of color with a progressive anti-racist agenda so that your work doesn't inadvertently fuel the backlash to the gains of the civil rights movement or otherwise collude with attacks on people of color. If you are a person with economic privilege, you need to be listening to the voices of poor and working-class people struggling for economic justice. Of course, these are not isolated identities. We can and should be accountable to groups and organizations which have a multi-issue social justice perspective.

Regardless of your ethnicity, race, gender, or economic position, as an activist (particularly one who has gained access to the buffer zone) you need to be accountable to people who are on the front lines of movements for social justice. You have to be engaged in a critical dialogue, while recognizing that because of your race, gender, class, sexual orientation, educational level, or other form of privilege you most likely have been socialized by our culture to expect to have all the answers and not to listen to those who have less social and political power than you do (that is, internalized supremacy). Therefore, I think it is important that privileged activists participate directly in some form of grassroots struggle, making sure to consult thoroughly and extensively with other activists similarly engaged.

***Are you involved in community-based social justice struggles?*** If you are not actively involved in a specific movement—be it the struggle for the redistribution of wealth, for immigrant rights, against environmental dumping, against police brutality, for access to health care, against male violence, or for peace—how are you learning? What are you modeling? What practice informs your work? For example, can you be accountable to communities struggling to end male violence if you are not politically involved yourself in some aspect of that struggle? Can you be an effective anti-racism trainer if you are not involved in anti-racism action?

***Is political struggle part of the work you do?*** Do you connect the participants in your programs/services/trainings to opportunities for ongoing political involvement? Do you work with participants on issues they define or on issues you or funders or others located in arenas of greater access and power define? Do you give participants tools and resources for getting involved in the issues they identify as most immediate for them, whether those are public policy issues such as immigration, affirmative action, welfare, or health care, or workplace, neighborhood, and community issues such as jobs, education, violence, and toxic waste? After experiencing contact with you, can they connect what they have just learned to the violence they experience in their lives? Are you responsive to their needs for survival, safety, economic well-being, and political action?

***Are you in a contentious relationship to those in power?*** The ruling class—those at the top of the pyramid—have an aggressive and persistent agenda to disempower and exploit those at the bottom. If you are accountable to those at the bottom of the pyramid, you will necessarily be challenging that agenda. Are you willing to speak truth to power, even at the risk of your current job or denial of future employment by certain agencies? Or do you hold back your real opinion so as not to make waves when you are at the “power-sharing” table? How have you come to justify your reluctance to challenge power?

***Are you sharing access to power and resources with those on the frontlines of the struggle?*** Do you systematically connect people in grassroots efforts to information, resources, supplies, money, research, and to each other?

***Do you help people come together?*** It would be simple and ideal if there were a cohesive or coherent community to be accountable to. Few such communities exist in our society and even fewer of us are connected to them. I believe that being accountable means supporting the growth and stability of cohesive communities. For example, do the battered women who leave your program understand themselves in connection to other battered women and their allies? Do the students in your classroom see themselves as part of a community of learners, activists, and change agents? Social change grows out of people understanding themselves to be interdependent, sharing common needs, goals, and interests. Are you helping people see that they are not alone, that their problems are not unique, and that their struggles are interrelated? Are you helping them come together for increased consciousness, resource sharing, and mobilization?

In the non-profit industrial complex, accountability is directed toward the ruling class and its managers—towards foundations, donors, government officials, larger non-profits, research institutes, universities, and the media. These are all forms of top-down accountability. I am suggesting a bottom-up accountability guided by those on the frontlines of grassroots struggles for justice. In which direction does your accountability lie?

We live in conservative political times and in a contracting economy in which racial, gender-based, religious, and homophobic violence is widespread and accepted. You may be discouraged about the possibility of doing effective political work in this context. You may be fearful of losing your job and livelihood or lowering your standard of living if you take risks. These are real concerns. But this is also a time of increasing and extensive organizing for social justice. It is an opportunity for many of us to realign ourselves clearly with those organizing efforts and reclaim the original vision of an end to the violence and exploitation which brought us into this work. This is a vision of social justice and true equity, built from community leadership and collective power.

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### Footnotes

1. Net financial wealth refers to all assets excluding housing and subtracting debt. It would include checking and savings accounts, stocks and bonds, commercial land and buildings, and so on. [Return to text]
2. Edward N. Wolff, *Recent Trends in Wealth Ownership, 1983-1998*, (Annandale-on-Hudson, NY: Jerome Levy Economics Institute, April 2000). Figures are for 1998. [Return to text]
3. A full analysis of how the ruling class and power elite control power and wealth, can be found in my book *You Call This a Democracy? Who Benefits, Who Pays, and Who Decides?* rev. ed. (New York: Apex Press, 2006). [Return to text]
4. For a history of these struggles and movements, see Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States: 1492-Present* (1980; repr., New York: Harper Perennial, 2003). [Return to text]
5. These distinctions in function are not always so separate in practice. For instance, many caretaking roles, such as that of social workers, also have a strong client-control element to them, and the police are now trying to soften their image by resort to community policing strategies to build trust in the community. [Return to text]
6. National Council of Nonprofit Associations, *The United States Nonprofit Sector* (annual report, Washington, DC: National Council of Nonprofit Associations, 2001). [Return to text]
7. Kivel, *You Call This a Democracy?* (New York: Apex Press, 2006), 120-124. For a detailed look at the role of foundations, see Joan Roelofs, *Foundations and Public Policy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003). [Return to text]
8. Jean Hardisty, *Mobilizing Resentment: Conservative Resurgence From the John Birch Society to the Promise Keepers* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 16. [Return to text]
9. Raymond Breton, *The Governance of Ethnic Communities: Political Structures and Processes in Canada* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1990), quoted in Taiaiake Alfred, *Peace, Power, Righteousness: An Indigenous Manifesto* (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press Canada, 2000), 74. [Return to text]
10. I am indebted to Taiaiake Alfred for this terminology from his book *Peace, Power, Righteousness*. [Return to text]
11. Alfred, *Peace, Power, Righteousness*, 76. [Return to text]
12. Tamara Jones, "Building Effective Black Feminist Organizations," *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society* 2, no. 4 (Fall 2000): 55. [Return to text]

### TAGS

ACTIVISM CLASS ECONOMIC JUSTICE ECONOMICS GENDER HOMELESSNESS INCARCERATION  
INTERSECTIONALITY LABOR LGBT POLICY POLITICS POVERTY QUEER RACE SOCIAL JUSTICE VIOLENCE