

Oppression and Democracy

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THESE WIDESPREAD AGREEMENT that the gap between the rich and poor in our society is larger than ever and still growing. We have 14 million children living in poverty (including an astounding 40% of African American children). Twelve million children are said to go hungry in our country. Tens of millions of women earn 70 cents for every dollar that men make. We have 45 million or so people without any health insurance. This amazing litany of human tragedy could go on and on. But how could these signs of human degradation exist in the *United States of America*, a country with such long democratic traditions, such strong egalitarian principles, and such immense wealth!?

My explanation for social inequality is that despite the best aspects of our democratic traditions, our society is fundamentally flawed by the existence of social oppression. Our society targets *all* people with oppression. I define oppression as:

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the systematic, institutionalized and socially condoned mistreatment of a group of people in society by another group or by people acting on behalf of the society as a whole. Oppression hinders people's ability both to think flexibly and to act freely on their own behalves and on behalf of others. Oppression interferes with people's ability to control the important decisions that affect their own lives and the life of the whole society. Oppression is thus a profoundly undemocratic phenomenon and a threat to our highest aspirations of liberty, equality, and justice.

There are six separate elements of oppression, each of which must be present in order to characterize an experience as "oppressive." To clarify, let me list these elements: (1) **mistreatment** that is (2) **systematic**, (3) **institutionalized**, (4) **socially condoned**, (5) **of a group**, (6) **by another group or people acting on behalf of society as a whole**. Experiences which contain some but not all elements of this definition would not, of course, be justified or in any way pleasant, but they would not be "oppression." The political implications of the distinction between oppressive mistreatment and other forms of mistreatment will be made clear below.

1. The first element is mistreatment. What can be said about all forms of oppressive mistreatment is that oppression fundamentally involves treatment that denies the basic humanity of the group being mistreated. There are many forms of mistreatment, including bodily injury or death either through violence or neglect, the denial of basic human needs for food, shelter, clothing, and medical care. Less recognized forms of mistreatment can include denial of work, education, or of meaningful opportunities for human growth, relegation to a status of social inferiority, subjection to misinformation, and the denial of love and nurturance.

2. Oppressive mistreatment is always systematic in nature. That is, the mistreatment is not occasional or happenstance. The targets of oppression come to expect mistreatment in many aspects of their lives on a regular basis. The power that the

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systematic nature of oppressive mistreatment has cannot be understated.

First, it means that you are hurt, thwarted, denigrated, and devalued in many different aspects of your life, not just once or twice, but time and again. People in your group are systematically depicted as deserving of mistreatment and the world treats people in your group accordingly. For example,

people of color in the United States are discriminated against in the housing rental and purchase market, in schools, in job hiring and promotion, and in negative portrayals and under-representation in mass media news and entertainment. The systematic nature of this mistreatment, then, is cumulative and the impact is far greater than if the hurts were just occasional or isolated occurrences.

The systematic nature of oppressive mistreatment also means that those who are mistreated cannot go through life in a normal carefree manner. If you have the experience of systematic hurts, you tend to come to be preoccupied with such hurts. You tend to develop instinctive, automatic ways of perceiving a world that often appears hostile. You tend to stay in a defensive posture, expecting the worst. You tend to give up on or limit your hopes and dreams. Or alternatively you may work, and work, and work to compensate for the fact that nothing will ever be easy. You may develop a hardened 'get-tough' attitude whereby you are determined to make it regardless of the costs or pain. Or you may walk around in a sort of defensive denial that anything is wrong at all. You tend to shrug off each incident as "just the way the world is." Each of these tendencies, however, interferes with

free to experience the world freshly in every moment. Of course, you take the same precautions that everyone must take to insure against accidental injury or occasional bad experiences, but there is no special weight on your shoulders.

3. Mistreatment is institutionalized when it is embedded in many of the laws, customs, norms, histories, and morals of a society. When mistreatment is enforced by a society's entire array of cultural forces, the power of such mistreatment is again multiplied in a manner that is much more powerful than if it were simply a small group of individuals acting badly.

For example, one aspect of the oppression of females in our culture (sexism) is systematic physical disempowerment. Despite years of gains by the women's liberation movement, it is still true today that from birth onward, most females in our society are not expected to be physically adept or powerful. From their impractical clothes, to the stress on being petite and lady-like, to the inadequate funding for girls' and women's athletics in schools and professional sports, to the derision still attached to the phrase "She throws like a girl," females are discouraged from developing or exercising their

ple—the point often is that *they are exceptions.*)

The point here is not so much about sexism, *per se*, but that when the overwhelming drift of a society's rules and norms and laws is set up to limit you, hurt you, and push you into a rigid set of roles and behaviors, your tendency will be to go along much more than if no institutional forces were in play.

4. Mistreatment is socially condoned when those people and institutions in charge of setting the standards of conduct in the society actively uphold it or at least turn a blind eye towards its existence. For every form of oppression in our society there is a socially sanctioned rationalization or justification for the mistreatment. Welfare recipients are poor because they are lazy. Black men are in prison because they are violent. Women are raped because they are "loose." Gays get AIDS because God is punishing them. Children are spanked because they need discipline. Men lose their children in child custody cases because they don't make as good parents as women. The effect of these rationalizations is compounded when those with the power to make moral or ethical pronouncements of what is acceptable social behavior openly support the mistreatment. Thus, when gay boys and men are physically assaulted or murdered and major church leaders and politicians continue to characterize homosexuality as a sin, then the moral force of the society compounds the hurts experienced and makes it more likely that such mistreatment will continue.

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your ability to think clearly and freshly about the world and makes it harder to make choices that allow you to pursue your goals effectively.

In comparison, when you have no reason to expect being hurt you can go through life in an unworried manner, leaving your mind and body

full physical power. By law and by custom, women are still not permitted to engage in military combat. In film and TV, women and girls are overwhelmingly depicted as physically passive and helpless. (Although there have been notable exceptions to this—the film *GI Jane*, for exam-

5. Oppression does not happen to people because of who they are individually. Instead, their membership in or association with a group is always *the excuse* for the oppression. When a young man is forced to register for the military draft, this is not

because he was assessed to be a particularly fit killer or because he was deemed to be expendable as an individual. Rather, the law requires ALL young men in this country to register for potential military service and the society assumes that ALL males are prone to violence and are expendable in crisis. (“Women and children first.”) When a dark skinned man is avoided on the street by a fearful European American woman, it is not because she thought he as an individual man was shiftless and dangerous. Rather, ALL men with dark skin are characterized as predatory and violent.

Of course, individual members of any given group can, and often do, try to separate themselves from their group association in order to be seen as individuals and to avoid the default stereotype about them. Some men go to lengths to appear to be gentle. Some men of color intentionally “dress up” when in public to look even more “respectable.” Many people targeted by oppression arrive at creative and successful strategies to mitigate the hurts that are thrust on them based on their association with their groups. But the group nature of the mistreatment always lurks in the background should their defensive tactics be abandoned.

6. Just as people are oppressed as individuals, it is never individuals acting on their own who can carry out oppression. Rather, oppression is almost always carried out by people who, by dint of their group associations, are socially conditioned to, expected to, and then empowered to be oppressive. Thus, in sexism, the group conditioned to mistreat females is males. In class oppression, every group a step up on the social and economic ladder is expected to dump on the groups below them. European Americans are trained to carry out mistreatment of people of color. Adults get authority over children. US born are

entitled to discriminate against immigrants, etc.

It is not my argument that the disempowered never mistreat those in power. Individual European Americans are mistreated by people of color, adults by children, men by

line enforcer of this standard is not males, but the individual woman who looks in the mirror every morning and sees herself as fat and ugly. Internalized sexism drives her actions. She puts on make up. She diets. She dresses in appropriately

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women. These individual acts are in fact hurtful to those who experience the mistreatment. But because the people targeted by oppression don’t have the “social authority” to carry out the mistreatment, their relative ability to cause harm as a group is much less. The overall impact on the group being mistreated does not accumulate and is relatively small. So, we do not see a pattern of rich people being harmed by poor people, adults being harmed by children, etc.

It should also be noted that not all of the mistreatment of the targets of oppression is carried out directly by those conditioned to be agents of oppression. In fact, the front-line enforcers of oppression are almost always the targets of oppression themselves. Through a lifetime of being oppressed and being told that their oppression was because of some horrible flaw in their own group, the oppressed come to “internalize” their oppression. In some measure, they come to believe the misinformation supporting their oppression. Then, they adopt and carry out oppressive acts on themselves and others within their own groups.

For example, a central aspect of sexism has been the sexualization of girls and women and the imposition of an impossible and arbitrary standard of “feminine beauty.” The front-

“feminine” clothing.

The second line of enforcement of the sexual feminine beauty standard is again not males, but instead is other females. Girls and women scrutinize each other for signs of imperfection or laxness in upholding their roles as sexual objects. “Look at those hairy legs!” “She’s dressed like a slut.” “She eats like a pig!”

Yes, men say these things about women, but usually to each other. It is women who say them to other women and communicate to each other that they are on the lookout for “the slackers” or rebels in keeping up a properly feminine front.

It is only when you get past these front-line forces of internalized sexism that enforcement by the empowered group comes into play. Here it is unrelenting and ultimately brutal. All of the institutional and systematic manners in which sexism is upheld—film, television, education, literature, job markets, marriage markets, etc.—act as both active and passive background to keep females in check. Then, and only then, if a girl or woman steps out of line, is when the males ultimately come in and play the role of enforcer of sexism. Lurking in the background, it is the men who are empowered to exert economic sanctions (in the form of job discrimination, divorce, etc.) and

ultimately violence (in the form of beatings, rape and murder). It is often the fear (conscious or unconscious) of these sanctions that tend to keep women in their roles.

It is not that there is a vast conspiracy of power elites who sit around and contemplate how oppressors can stay in charge. In fact, continuing with the example of sexism, most men would be individually horrified at the acts that are required to keep them in their positions of privilege. Virtually no men would condone the murder of a woman by a violent man. But neither would they readily take all of the actions needed to eliminate the myriad of complex and interconnected social conditions associated with sexism, male oppression, and social violence which ultimately led to the death of such a woman. Instead, an individual man would see himself as having limited power and even less responsibility for a particular woman's death. To the extent that he could see himself as having taken any actions at all, he would see himself as having properly upheld the array of completely "normal" social conditions needed to maintain what he viewed as an orderly society.

CONCLUSIONS

Because I have spent a lot of time here describing the characteristics of oppression, I also want to emphasize that this model does not require us to place blame or to label any individual or any group as "bad." Certainly, I would argue that the behavior patterns entailed in oppression are ugly and deserving of condemnation. But it is also my belief that no one willingly chooses to be oppressive, no more than anyone willingly chooses to be mistreated. Instead, each person resists playing any part in an oppressive environment. In many instances our resistance is successful and we manage to escape some of the worst aspects of an oppressive society. But

given the overwhelming nature of the forces which we are up against, at some point we do in fact give in to at least part of the oppression, both as agents and targets of oppression.

Both as target *and as agent* of oppression we are hurt in the process of oppressive conditioning. We are all caught in this web. None of us escapes. Each of us plays a role somewhere in the society as agent of oppression for some other group. And each of us is in turn targeted by oppression, if in no other capacity, in the capacity of being forced into the role of being an agent of oppression. First, in the process of being condi-

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tioned to be oppressive, people are given hurtful misinformation about the group being targeted.

Second, those who resist playing out their oppressive roles are themselves sanctioned. Managers who refuse to squeeze extra profits out of their workers find themselves out of work. Boys who refuse to sexually objectify or taunt girls or to go along with oppressing gays are themselves "queer baited." Whites who interfere with police brutality against people of color are themselves arrested and sometimes beaten. Every dissident in a dominant group is threatened with group ostracism, loss of privileges, and worse. The basic message is "go

along or get out." For young people, there isn't even the option of "getting out." It's simply "go along." Thus, it is only through the collective oppression of *all* people that any oppression has been able to exist.

While this perspective is in some ways overwhelming, in other ways it is liberating. For it means that we all have something we can do to eliminate oppression and we all have reason to do so. In each of our roles as targets of oppression we can create new ways of resisting and aiding others to resist. As agents of oppression, we can recognize and refuse the social authority thrust upon us as we are expected to carry out hurtful roles. All of us can begin to identify the many ways we have internalized the negative stereotypes about ourselves and others. We can treat ourselves and each other as vital humans, full of grace and intelligence and potential. We can stop turning a blind eye towards injustice and stop minimizing our own power to heal this broken society.

We have all resisted the oppressive conditioning of our society. In fact, what I find extraordinary and delightful is how wonderfully we manage to do in spite of the many institutional forces compelling us to act quite horribly to each other. I love how we manage to survive and flourish. I love how creative we still are. I love how we manage to love one another and build close relationships. In short, I love our humanity, even amidst the forces of oppression. Altogether I think we're really quite remarkable.

But can't we do better? Don't we want to do better? I, for one, think yes. I think our highest aspirations as a society call for us to do better. I think we yearn for freedom not just for those "others" but for ourselves as well. The rewards are great. If not for oppression, we could make a virtual paradise here. Or if not a paradise, at least a real democracy. ■