ON THE GROUND

STRUGGLES AND LESSONS OF ANTIRACISM WORK

PROJECT change

On the Ground
Struggles and Lessons of Antiracism Work

BY

Mark Patrick George (primary)
Shirley Strong

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Mark Patrick George teaches Applied Sociology at Valdosta State University. Mark has worked with valdosta Project Change both as an emloyee and as a volunteer.

Shirley Strong currently is Dean of Students at the California Institute for Integral Studies. From 1993–2006 she served as Project Manager and Executive Director of Project Change at the Levi Strauss Foundation and later at the Tides Center.

INTRODUCTION

Project Change is a community of organizations working to eliminate racism. It began in 1991 as a partnership between the Levi Strauss Foundation and three communities – Albuquerque, New Mexico; El Paso, Texas; and Valdosta, Georgia. A fourth community, Knoxville, Tennessee, joined the partnership in 1993. In 1997, Project Change became a project of the Tides Center, a non-profit fiscal sponsor to forward thinking activists and organizations.

The goals of the community partnership have been to:

- Dismantle institutional policies and practices that promote racial discrimination;

- Ease tensions between minority and majority groups and reduce inter-ethnic conflict;

- Promote fair representation of diversity in the leadership of community institutions; and

- Stop overt or violent acts of racial or cultural prejudice.

In 2002, Project Change (PC) entered into a partnership with the Institute for Democratic Renewal (IDR) at Claremont Graduate University. The goals of IDR/PC are to help communities participate more fully in the democratic process and to strengthen anti-racist/anti-oppression infrastructures and networks.

On the Ground: Struggles and Lessons for Anti-Racism Work, offers insights about what people experience as they do this work. A companion report, *Looking Back: Project Change From 1991-2005*, explores the history, model and accomplishments of Project Change and their implications. Both publications were developed from the same research. Additional copies are available at these websites:

www.projectchange.org

www.race-democracy.org

CONTENTS

WHAT'S THIS DOCUMENT ABOUT?

T HIS DOCUMENT IS an attempt to reflect on the state of contemporary social change work and assess its effectiveness. Our assessment has taken more than three years to finish and it has gone through a variety of changes, as has the nation, during this time.

Initially, when we began thinking about what might be useful to the larger community working for social justice we thought we would simply develop a laundry list of issues antiracists and other change advocates could expect to encounter as we do our work. Our hope was that such a resource might help people know what to expect in order to do their work more effectively. However, after more soul searching this approach seemed hollow and superficial. We also became convinced that a "*laundry list*" would not include the underlying problems 21st century social justice work faces. Thus, we have taken a more direct approach in naming and discussing these challenges head on. The primary challenges from our view are:

- the ways we go about doing social change work

- the era we find ourselves in as we do our work, and the fit between this new age and our thinking.

Therefore, we changed direction and chose to focus our time and energy on these challenges. We want to talk about how they unfold in our work, and offer suggestions about what we might do to overcome and learn from them. To achieve these aims we drew upon a variety of information including:

- interviews with members of Project Change antiracist initiatives;

- informal conversations with other social change advocates;

- our own experience working in various social justice efforts; and

- the wisdom of those who have preceded us in the work of making the world more just and compassionate.

In the process we produced the document you now have before you, one that is a review of social change work today, our struggle to do that work effectively, along with what we might need to do differently in the future. In this brief overview, we have done our best to be totally honest about our perspective on the current state of change work. However, this report should not be read as a rigorous study or definitive guide to doing social change work. It is also not about attacking, blaming,

faultfinding or finger pointing. It is our informal assessment of the present state of change work given what we know at this moment in time. Moreover, it is a call for us to ask ourselves if the work we are doing is working and if not, what do we need to do differently in the future?

Who Should Read It?

Though many of us may have some success working around these issues, addressing and unweaving what creates them and how different forms of oppression are sewn into the fabric of American culture is another matter all together.

This report is intended for anyone who works for social justice or wants to see oppression end and equality realized. And although those new to change work might find it useful, it is especially directed toward veterans of justice work who are questioning whether what they are doing is effective. It is intended for those who have a deep nagging in their heart that their existing tactics, motives, and approaches to change work may be inadequate.

How Should It Be Read and Used?

We hope this document will serve as a resource to inform and spark dialogue among those of us working for a more just world. In addition to assisting social justice advocates in doing their work more effectively, it is intended to help maintain sanity and develop greater compassion in the process. This text should be read and thought of as part of a continuing dialogue, one that will surely be amended, refined, and transformed as the work moves forward. It should be viewed and used as an organic document, one to be shared, circulated, applied, and altered as people discuss it, and discard it when it is no longer useful. Most importantly, know that it is offered in a spirit of love, respect, and deep appreciation for all who work to make this a more just and compassionate world.

Is Change Work Working?

In spite of the growth reported in anti-oppression literature, progressive websites, and social change organizations, the answer to this very important question is both yes and no.

Yes, in some settings, if you are talking about reforming organizations, bringing attention to particular isolated injustices, or getting specific policies changed, but even these victories are few and far between. And yes, if you measure success based on the growing numbers of people who do social change work and the growing body of resources in consulting, writing and workshops that are available to us all.

On the other hand, if we are talking about building a mass, unified movement for social change, one that will have the power to address and alter oppressive core attributes of American culture, the answer would likely be, no. That has yet to happen and will not happen unless we alter our course. Although there is more work occurring around a variety of interconnected injustices and success does occur around isolated issues, the sad truth is that many social change initiatives are short lived, and those that have longevity tend to be small and insular. We must also face

the fact that in light of recent events, another war, shifts in the national political arena, globalization, and Hurricane Katrina, we may be losing ground as we constantly find ourselves in a reactive rather than a proactive posture for what may come next.

Finally, change efforts are rarely effective in affecting the moral direction of the nation and the cultural and systemic root causes of racism and other oppressions, not just the issues these injustices spawn such as police brutality, political and economic inequities, the prison industrial complex, violence against women, homophobic acts, heterosexism, environmental degradation, and rampant consumerism. Though many of us may have some success working around these issues, addressing and unweaving what creates them and how different forms of oppression are sewn into the fabric of American culture is another matter all together.

What's the Problem?

Although it would be nice to say that our work is so effective that those in power consistently and diligently work to squash and undermine it, this is not the case. One of the biggest obstacles to effective social change work is the ongoing internal dynamic that occurs within and across our various change efforts. Thus, one of the major problems is us rather than some outside power or opponent; it is our inability to negotiate and compromise, to look honestly at our own shortcomings, to work collaboratively for the long term, to get along with and love and forgive one another. Our efforts often reflect the fact that we have not realized the change we want to see within ourselves and because of that we often do anti-oppression work in an oppressive manner. Until we recognize what we are doing, this is not likely to change. It will not change until we begin to embody the values we want to establish in the world at large. It will not change until we model the kind of world we want to see with one another and those outside our change efforts. This is not to blame anyone, lay a guilt trip, or ignore the ongoing realities of social oppression and unjust systems. Instead, it is meant to point out that our own blind spots are critical problems that undermine our efforts and that we not addressing these problems. One example of this challenge is our unwillingness to move beyond our own comfort zone when we find ourselves in diverse social change spaces and demonstrate respect through inclusive practices.

A second challenge we must face is that we are doing social change work in a complex age and in many ways our thinking, organizing, and strategizing has yet to catch up with this new context. We are faced with rapid technological shifts, intense globalization, domestic and international instabilities as we do our work in an era where individualism and consumerism are highly valued. In addition, many of us who were once excluded from the American dream now partake in it and cherish our participation. Based on economic shifts in the last three to four decades, many are reluctant to work for change because for the first time in our lives we now have something (positions, status, legitimacy, and wealth) to lose if we speak out against injustice. Therefore, it's very difficult to mobilize those with vested interest in the continuation of the status quo in the fight for justice. It is an age where oppression is more covert and sophisticated than ever before.

Although progressive organizations are more numerous than ever, many of these organizations carry out their work in isolation or compete with one another.

A second challenge we must face is that we are doing social change work in a complex age and in many ways our thinking, organizing, and strategizing has yet to catch up with this new context.

Furthermore, our work and lives unfold in an ever-changing and unstable world, one that can impact our work at a moment's notice as Hurricane Katrina did. All of these new realities serve to fragment, fracture, and confuse the work we do. So, in addition to needing to become and live the change we want to see, as history shapers and activists, we need to alter and rethink how we go about doing change work.

GETTING IN THE WAY OF OUR WORK
& DOING ANTI-OPPRESSION WORK
OPPRESSIVELY

ONE OF THE MAIN ironies about those of us who work against oppression is that we usually do not devote time to exploring and addressing how we, too, may be oppressive. This oversight is one of the key reasons many change efforts are so short lived and collapse from the inside out. This is a not a new problem. It is a recurring pattern that has haunted movements in the past.

Many of us come to change circles, not as mere human beings wanting a more just world, but as representatives of our professional title, organizations and institutions, as someone of clout, someone who has "*made it*" in America. It is as if we have forgotten that what we do or what we have is not who we are at our core. In the absence of that memory, we go about relating to others in a distant, cold, paternalistic and authoritarian manner. As a result, we are reluctant to listen and feel the frustrations of others with less money, less power, or fewer credentials. We sometimes treat social change work as if it is one of many civic duties or charities we support instead of something we live. Therefore, we fail to connect on a human level. It is as if our success and status has put our humanity to sleep. All of this separates us from one another and weakens any real chance for community, group trust, and solidarity to emerge in the work we do.

Sometimes these attitudes are accompanied by specific philosophies and approaches to social change work that stress slow, incremental, conservative, reformative change, change that is generally non-confrontational or controversial. This rubs against those who are barely making it and for whom change cannot come quickly enough. Change was needed yesterday by people who look to it to gain a better daily life, whether it is changes in housing policies, educational opportunities, relationship with the criminal justice system, or access to quality healthcare. Economic differences orient and commit us to social change work differently and they also reflect the potential for conflict as they rise and play out at the surface. Those without economic power typically seek direct action immediately while those with something to lose call for slow incremental activities involving diplomacy. Many of us are more comfortable working behind the scenes than in the streets. We are more at ease if we do not rock the boat too much because as one person put it, we feel that "*you catch more flies with honey than with vinegar*."

On another level, economic differences reflect a deeper rift amongst social justice workers. One which involves those with class privilege assuming that social change work is simply about changing things so that others who are less fortunate can

Economic differences orient and commit us to social change work differently and they also reflect the potential for conflict as they rise and play out at the surface.

"have the things we have," or can *"live like we live."* These dangerous assumptions demonstrate the seductive nature of success as defined by the dominant culture and its dehumanizing power, and they block deep reflection about what one has to do to board the proverbial boat of American success and float into the American Dream. They obstruct the fact that in the eyes of many, especially those without class and institutional privilege, the cost of passage into that dream may be too costly culturally, psychologically, and spiritually. For many change advocates, past and present, joining or desiring to be part of existing institutions is like boarding a sinking ship or moving into a burning house.

Regardless of these important issues, change advocates with social clout regularly equate social justice with securing access and opportunities for those locked out of institutional life instead of looking deeply into the morality and objectives of institutions. As one person put it when expressing her frustration about how her change group spent time teaching people how to *"fill out applications for bank loans instead of changing the banks, their application process, and lending practices as a whole."* Or, as another person described his frustration with assimilationist change approaches, *"when you have retired military men at the table, who think that the system works, that it's good, with young black men, who are not for the military and think that the whole system needs to be changed, it gets difficult!"*

Another major challenge is that privileged behavior seems normal to those who exhibit it. Most individuals are usually unaware of the ways in which their sense of entitlement marginalizes others even in spaces where equity is a major goal. Frequently, individuals with educational accomplishments and material resources come to change efforts with expectations of dictating or making major decisions or with ideas about the *"right way to do things"* because they believe their experiences are more valuable to the process than those with less education and money. It can be very difficult to get people with privilege to realize that their resources have been acquired through a system that inherently privileges some while marginalizing others. Awareness of these different orientations makes it easier to understand why many change advocates are angry, distrustful and view one another with suspicion and resentment. And though the assumptions, motivations, and objectives of many middle class change agents are sometimes troubling, this is not meant to suggest that they are the only source of confusion and conflict when it comes to class differences. This is also not meant to suggest that those without class privilege are passive and innocent bystanders. As Dr. King pointed out, *"nothing in wealth is inherently vicious and nothing in poverty is inherently virtuous."*[1]

As we become a more diverse society, we will have to increase our tolerance and acceptance of difference within our communities in order to build successful alliances across these widening chasms. In the end, enemies are created and lines are drawn in the proverbial sand, lines that separate and weaken the effectiveness of the efforts we support, lines that divide us against our self-interest and our long-term goals for social change.

 Along with the problems that arise because of economic differences, we oppress and dehumanize one another through sexism, homophobia, religious intolerance, ageism, and other oppressions that we perpetrate in our social change circles and in our communities at large. This is an ongoing problem so it should be no surprise that our member base, allies, and potential supporters constantly fall away or vanish. They fall away and vanish when men repeatedly dominate spaces, when

Change advocates with social clout regularly equate social justice with securing access and opportunities for those locked out of institutional life instead of looking deeply into the morality and objectives of institutions.

1 From *Strength to Love*, p.53, New York, Harper & Row 1963

straight people alienate G/L/B/T/Q/I[2] members, when Christians marginalize those who are not Christian, when our young disrespect our elders, when our elders dismiss our youth, and when those with class status marginalize those without economic power, an official title, or a lucrative profession. One person described her experience along generational lines in one change effort as follows:

> "*It was clear that a lot of the older people were not comfortable with younger people being involved…and at times there was conflict. Ultimately, I feel that the younger people's take on things were written off to the point that they left the group.*"

This tendency is part of a larger mistake many of us continue to make which is attempting to address one form of oppression while ignoring other oppressions and expecting to build a mass, unified movement for justice.

When this fact is brought up inside change circles, or when we are challenged about our oppressive behavior and asked to explore it, most of us make excuses or turn a deaf ear to such accusations. And regardless of the reason we give, we continuously fail to look at how we too might be oppressive to those around us and those in the struggle with us. We do this because we fail to acknowledge or explore how we might be privileged along lines of race, gender, sexuality, class, religion, etc. At the most extreme end, many of us even believe we do not have to think about these areas because we are oppressed or belong to an oppressed group. We argue that our oppression is primary and separate from other forms. We see and rank our oppression as the most severe and dehumanizing form. At our most defensive, we argue that other forms of oppression are qualitatively different from our own and less destructive and want to work only on our own issues or the forms of oppression that affect our group. With this attitude, we draw lines between ourselves and others and set up what some have termed "*Oppression Olympics*," where one form of oppression "*wins the gold*" and other forms of injustice, if they make it, are placed lower in a hierarchy of oppressions.

From our most short-sighted positions, we may argue that those other areas are not bona fide oppressions and that people are being too sensitive. We may accuse others of trying to avoid the areas we want to address by interjecting their own issue. This does not mean that people do not try to use their own oppression to escape discussion of other forms because it does happen. Nonetheless, people who are marginalized along lines other than the particular oppression under consideration, repeatedly and consistently encounter oppressive spaces within social justice efforts where activists use the same logic and strategies we are combating. When people come to social change work and experience the continuous sting of these behaviors, they usually become silent, miss meetings and events, slowly drop off, and fade away. Those who stay conclude that their departure was an indication that they were not really serious about the work after all.

The seriousness and tragedy of these ongoing, recurring tendencies cannot be over emphasized. They are serious and tragic because they not only stop movements from forming, they also alienate both those most likely to understand oppression and those most liable to work against it on a long term basis. In many cases those most likely to understand how oppression works and those most likely to work against it are those with lived, firsthand experience with oppression and domination. Thus, this tendency is responsible for the loss of those most likely to empathize, understand, and commit to working for justice on an on-going long-term basis

This tendency is part of a larger mistake many of us continue to make which is attempting to address one form of oppression while ignoring other oppressions and expecting to build a mass, unified movement for justice.

---

2 This is common shorthand for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Intersex communities.

We must develop a new vision that reflects a radical revolution in values.

because of our inability, or unwillingness, to look at our own "*baggage*," our own tendencies to be oppressive, and our unwillingness to change as much as we want others to.

The fact that oppressions are not only interconnected but overlap and fuel one another is not going away on its own, nor will the fact that many of us are oppressive and destructive because of the sexism, heterosexism, classism, racism, and other "*isms*" we live out as we do our change work. Therefore, it may be time for us to acknowledge that although we may be oppressed along one social category we can simultaneously be oppressive if we enjoy class, male, Christian, and heterosexual social privilege. We must face the fact that no form of oppression trumps another and that the excuses we use to keep from facing how we oppress others are echoes of the excuses others use as they oppress us. We also might consider that our reluctance to engage and explore our own forms of social privilege might lend important insight into why others are reluctant to look at theirs. In order to change as much as we are asking others to we must explore those uncomfortable places in ourselves and begin to live the insightful adage that, "*injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.*[3]" And finally, we must develop a new vision that reflects a radical revolution in values.

---

3 From a *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, Martin Luther King Jr. 1963.

THE PAYOFFS OF OPPRESSED/OPPRESSOR, VICTIMIZED/VICTIMIZER IDENTITIES

ANOTHER DESTRUCTIVE PATTERN that has to be examined is seeing ourselves primarily as the oppressed. When we see ourselves primarily as victims, whether we acknowledge this or not, or whether we are conscious of it or not, it excuses us from looking at our own privilege. Moreover, it fosters a sense of powerless and helplessness within us, and that lack of agency, in turn, absolves us from any responsibility for our situation regarding success or failure in our work. If the work falters, membership drops, people leave, it is someone else's fault or something we have no control over. A variety of payoffs in psychological dividends seem to motivate many activists to adopt a victimized identity that we must honestly explore and discuss if we are to keep this practice from undermining efforts and sapping energy.

Victimization can also create an underlying sense of resentment and bitterness against those who are not defined as oppressed in social change spaces. That practice can leads to a space filled with conflict or deafening silence. This process of mutual dehumanization undercuts change efforts by keeping the oppressed safe in their identity and by demonizing and silencing those who do not qualify for it. It also serves to run away those locked in a place of seeing themselves as unduly privileged and inherently oppressive. And at its most pathological, this dynamic can become an endless battle within some change circles, one that serves to create causalities and alienate potential allies and supporters. Given the destructive force of oppression, as well as the difficulty, pain, and the struggle involved in working for change, it is understandable that many of us will sometimes lash out, react, and hurt one another as we do this work. This process regularly undermines solidarity among groups and causes many to walk away from organizations and efforts with the feeling that one is "*damned if you do and damned if you don't*" in working for change and justice.

A second psychological payoff of constructing ourselves solely as the oppressed is that it encourages us to see ourselves as innocent and even morally superior to others, as if we do not participate in or benefit from oppressive systems. When we see ourselves as merely the victims of injustice, we often convince ourselves that we do not have any social power to do harm. Therefore, many of us fail to be accountable for the success and failure of efforts, yet take it upon ourselves to hold others responsible for outcomes.

Our work is focused on changing these systems and the consciousness that drives them rather than merely winning inclusion into existing ways of being, seeing the world, and conducting business.

What Drives These Dynamics?

So, why do we take on these roles? Why do we treat each other so unfairly? Why can't we see the parallels and connections between oppressions? Why do we deny our privilege when we also qualify as oppressed? Why do we participate in these ongoing processes of disempowerment?

As these dynamics unfold, our dependency on dichotomous thinking and binary social change models cause many change efforts to flounder. Our tendency to see the world in these terms and undermine change work is not simple, deliberate, intentional, and mean spirited or even a conscious act. It is part of an overall social consciousness that we are a product of and continue to operate from, even as people working for change. Our tendency to see the world or others in either/or terms is especially ironic since most activists argue that at the heart of justice work is the effort to change dichotomous, adversarial thinking whether it is changing our education, criminal justice, political/economic systems, the media, or our culture in order to make room for difference.

Our work is fundamentally about dispelling the notion that there is one right way to do things as we highlight the need for and value different ways of knowing and seeing the world. It involves an effort to change the idea that reality is a black/white, good/bad, and us/them matter. It's about changing the belief that difference is deviant, something threatening, and something to be feared and squashed. In fact, change efforts typically make the case that this practice drives the oppressive systems we want to change, whether we talk about it in terms of Eurocentricity, monoculturalism, patriarchy, heterosexism, or class exploitation. Therefore, our work is focused on changing these systems and the consciousness that drives them rather than merely winning inclusion into existing ways of being, seeing the world, and conducting business. Our work is geared towards changing and liberating human hearts and minds in order to give rise to a new consciousness and way of relating to one another. As Paulo Friere put it, "*justice work is the vocation of becoming more fully human*".[4]

The power, importance, necessity, and value of using social change models, and analyses to deconstruct political situations in order to change them cannot be underestimated. In fact, education and learning are vital to change work whether it comes through workshops, trainings, readings, either formal or informal. Understanding from these sources is often transformative for many in helping us gain a new understanding of ourselves and the world. For some it can even restore a sense of sanity as we learn how oppression can impact and define us. One person shared the following when discussing what attending antiracism training meant to her:

> "*I don't think I had a cogent analysis of racism… and because of that I had anxiety. I had a sense of abiding anger because of the pain and anguish of my experience. So, to be able to develop a perspective around it helped me by giving me a way to talk about it, a way to explore what it all means.*"

Our work is geared towards changing and liberating human hearts and minds in order to give rise to a new consciousness and way of relating to one another.

4 From *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, p.25, 1997. Continuum Publishing: New York.

CATCHING UP WITH THE AGE: WORKING FOR CHANGE IN AN NEW ERA

MANY CHANGES HAVE occurred in the last fifty years or so, both here and abroad and it is necessary for us to consider how these changes have helped and hindered the broader struggle for a more just and compassionate world.

In addition to the implementation of an assortment of anti-discrimination laws and policies in the last four to five decades, there has been significant economic improvement for various oppressed groups leading to the inclusion of people who were once excluded from various U.S. institutions. And finally, there have been a major demographic shifts which have led to increased diversification within the U.S. population. We have witnessed unparalleled globalization through the increased activity of multinational corporations in the spread of capitalism worldwide, the birth of the information age, the digital divide, the fall of communism, and most recently, another ill fated war, and a disaster named Katrina that so poignantly illustrated how we fail to come to one another's rescue in the worst of times. In short, much has changed and doing change work today is not the same as in the past. A climate of optimism for a better, more just world no longer permeates the air and oppression and injustice, in terms of what they look like, how they work, and how they can be challenged, are more complex than ever.

We need to consider whether our work and thinking mesh well within the context of society today. It is clear that efforts for justice today are confronted by a variety of new realities that at a minimum include how changes in the past four to five decades have made many forms of oppression more covert and systematized. In addition, events in our unstable world can impact the work we do at a moment's notice. These realities present a number of complexities that add to our ineffectiveness and confusion, complexities we will now begin to explore.

At a deeper level, changes in the last few decades mean we live in an age where oppression and injustice have become more reliant on the cooperation of those once excluded from the American Dream.

So What's Different About Today?

In the last four to five decades many in this nation have seen their economic and political lot improve because of the courageous struggles of Civil Rights, Women's Rights, and Gay Rights Movements. Therefore, in the eyes of many, injustice has been dealt with, as traditional forms of discrimination, state brutality, and legal exclusions once witnessed are fewer and less frequent.

However, we need to be clear that progress does not yet apply to all marginalized peoples even though many overt forms of oppression are less visible today. Because

We reside in a time where the social changes so diligently fought for have not only created a veneer of inclusion and equity, but have also been used by those in power to keep things the same.

of the low visibility of injustice, many people going about their daily lives fail to recognize it because they are often looking for the wrong things in the wrong places. Many forms of oppression, because of past movements, have gone "*underground*" and become embedded in the culture, policies, and procedures of institutions and have become more systematized and sophisticated as in case of the criminal justice and public education systems.

At a deeper level, changes in the last few decades mean we live in an age where oppression and injustice have become more reliant on the cooperation of those once excluded from the American Dream. Many of us, now, have a seat at the table, though we do not own the table and are not at the head of it, and we no longer seem interested in building a new table or pulling up more chairs for others. Those once locked out of institutional life now enjoy limited membership. Yet, no major transformation of institutions, their agendas, and ethical viewpoints have come to pass. We live in a time, where because of past changes and progress; many now have more to lose for speaking out when injustice occurs. Many of us have turned our backs on members of our extended family who still lack access to the institutions, capital, and skills necessary for participation in the American Dream, a dream we rarely think critically about.

The changes that occurred have, in many ways, caused us to forget, overlook, and scapegoat those that remain locked out and locked away. Even though in this new era legal forms of injustice and oppression may be redefined and economic shifts have occurred, we certainly have yet to witness anything near a radical revolution of values[5]. In fact, it is arguable that we have actually witnessed the reverse as we find ourselves in an era and culture where the oppressive, dehumanizing core values that so deeply troubled Dr. King have become more entrenched and infectious than ever. We reside in a time where the social changes so diligently fought for have not only created a veneer of inclusion and equity, but have also been used by those in power to keep things the same. Furthermore, it has resulted in the proliferation of other "*isms*" that we must grapple with as we do our work.

Along with more sophisticated and deeply embedded forms of racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, we have a radical increase in the valuation of individualism, careerism, materialism, consumerism, and narcissism. Instead of a world where institutions are transformed to honor cultural inclusion and seek to spread opportunity and resources, we now live in a world where many subscribe to the notion of, "*I got mine, you get yours.*" Opportunity for more of us to participate in oppressive systems has increased the valuing of things[6] and radical concern and care for people such that it dehumanizes everyone. Racism, extreme materialism, and militarism[7] remain with us in new and improved forms. Instead of recognition of the universal humanity of all, our work unfolds in an era where many of us, regardless of being oppressed ourselves, often participate in the oppression of others. Historically oppressed groups, people of color, white women, and the poor, often unite and coalesce with their oppressors to exclude and denounce some other marginalized group. Recent examples have included the following:

- Multiracial, male/female coalitions working to amend the constitution to ban gay marriage

- Class commonalities overriding racial identities and inequalities as middle class people of color and whites unite to protect their interests and demonize the poor especially undocumented workers

5 From *Why I Oppose the Vietnam War*, Martin Luther King Jr. 1969.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.

- People of color and whites uniting to militarize the border and scapegoat immigrants for the economic woes of the nation, woes caused by multinational corporations and the forces of globalization

- Both Christians of color and whites, men and women of all races, people of every sexual orientation uniting in a common suspicion, paranoia, and racism toward Arab Americans and anything related to Islam

- Those once excluded from American institutional life becoming the proponents and protectors of those institutions and the status quo

- Former oppressed and excluded groups internalizing the values of the dominant culture including its extreme individualism, materialism, and consumerism, where one's worth is determined by what one owns not one's status as a human being

The new complexities of social reality demand new approaches, new analyses, new language, and new thinking as these complexities also challenge clear-cut, black and white notions of who is responsible for injustice, how it works, how it is maintained, and how to engage it. Binary models and language are outmoded and ill suited for the social terrain we must navigate because injustice has become a more inclusive process mixing various groups and forms of injustice with various forms of privilege in order to sustain the overall arrangement and culture of American society. Change work today must grapple with how to identify, engage, translate, and communicate this new reality to the broader society. We must also acknowledge, examine, and address how we too, as people working for change also participate in these processes.

The new complexities of social reality demand new approaches, new analyses, new language, and new thinking as these complexities also challenge clear-cut, black and white notions of who is responsible for injustice, how it works, how it is maintained, and how to engage it.

An Age of Countless but Isolated Social Change Efforts

More social change efforts exist today than ever before. In fact, at no other time in the history of this nation have so many different people and organizations been working to draw attention to numerous social ills related to justice and equity. In the U.S., we have become more rights conscious and have seen significant shifts in the treatment of the marginalized.

Much of the social change work has grown more comodified, professionalized, and institutionalized since the days of the Civil Rights Movement. According to the Urban Institute's National Center for Charitable Statistics, as of 2006 there were more than 6000 federally recognized non-profit organizations under the rubric of civil rights, social action, and advocacy. There were more than three million separate, federally recognized organizations[8] doing work on issues resulting from injustice and inequality in housing, the environment, employment, crime, human services, public safety, education, and philanthropy. We are highly credentialed and employed in organizations that abide by assorted guidelines set by some one other than ourselves, and most frequently by state and federal government agencies. "*In 2004, nonprofits—including public charities, private foundations, and all others— accounted for 8.3 percent of the wages and salaries paid in the United States.*"[9]

8 Taken from the National Center for Charitable Statistics' website. http://nccsdataweb.urban.org/PubApps/profileDrillDown.php?state=US&rpt=PC

9 Ibid.

In the last four to five decades we have experienced a shift in what it means to work for change. Some analysts believe this transition was an attempt to actually control social change work through governmental affiliation, involvement, and endorsement. Many people accept the idea that formal organizations and professionals are more suited to address and solve social problems than the people these problems actually impact. Many of us working in these areas have internalized this idea and confused social service work with social change work.

Today's social change efforts typically operate in isolation with a myopic view of the broader world and a limited definition of justice.

Today's social change efforts typically operate in isolation with a myopic view of the broader world and a limited definition of justice. We are concerned with our isolated issues and agendas, our survival and our funding. Our efforts prioritize our own agenda, analyses, and solutions sought. This way of proceeding usually fails to include or acknowledge the interconnectedness of different issues and oppressions. We do not work collaboratively and often do not work to articulate or actively draw attention to how various issues result from poverty, lack of healthcare, adequate housing, personal safety, and inadequate educational opportunities. We are not talking with one another. We are not supporting one another. At times, we even see each other as suspect, problematic, and threatening and actively compete with one another ideologically as well as for attention and resources.

Too often, we become overly concerned with who defines the problem and strategies, along with who gets the funding and credit, both of which override the larger goals we seek. We continue to speak for others, fail to include those we represent in decision making, do not think about hiring or including those we advocate for on our boards and staff, and rarely reflect on what gives us the authority to do these things. This results in fragmented terrains where the potential collective power of efforts is watered down and rendered ineffective. It may be time to rethink what we are doing, why we are doing it, and whether or not it is working?

An Increasingly Interconnected, Yet Unstable World

We must think about and position our work within the context of a world that experiences ongoing political flux and conflict. These last few years of U.S. militarism, have silenced progressive voices and created a paralyzing paranoia and fear among social change activists and the broader population. For many of us it's hard to remember where the nation was politically and what was happening prior to 9/11. We have witnessed the commission of a war based on misinformation, hints at expanding the "*War on Terror*", "*The Patriot Act*"; and other policies that have revoked an assortment of civil liberties.

In 2005, Hurricane Katrina vividly demonstrated that we are as yet unable to come to the aid of the least of us when we are at our most vulnerable. The Katrina disaster also reminded us of our inability or unwillingness as a national government to respond with an outpouring of necessary resources. These events, along with the global "*War on Terror*", reflect an age where the climate and culture of fear that permeates this nation have been multiplied many times over. As a result, attention to domestic issues and the movements that preceded these events have been lost. In their place, the public is bombarded with countless things to fear including immigrants "*stealing*" jobs and "*milking*" social systems, more hurricanes, the Avian Flu, SARs, TB, crime and criminals, global warming, our youth, and finally, terrorists wanting to "*defile this nation because of their hatred of our freedom*".

Progressive social change agents have yet to get clear on what happened and how it can happen again. We have yet to reflect collectively on the broader forces of changes that pulled the rug out from under our feet with the events of 9/11, events that in some ways really began with the 2000 presidential debacle. What we have learned is that such events and this nation's reaction to them, largely in the form of blind militarism, renders many of us silent and invisible out of fear. Regressive policies, laws, and the steady erosion of civil liberties that have followed, remind us that although social change is often slow in coming, it can come rather rapidly and go in many directions, directions that are counter productive to equity and justice.

What does this mean for our work? It means that we find ourselves doing social change work within a time of rampant national insecurity saturated with defensiveness, a time that is not likely to pass soon unless we work to encourage its departure. We must plan for abrupt oppositional forces and events we cannot foresee that can emerge at anytime. We must be sensitive to national and international changes and reference them in our thinking and planning along with the backlash and paranoia they fuel. Finally, it also means that we must ask ourselves whether we are willing to make the sacrifices and "*speak truth to power*" in the ways those who came before us did, and we must seek ways to do so collectively.

So Where Do We Go from Here?

What are we going to do differently and how are we going to do it? Part of the discovery of new methods must involve exploring if and how we have been taken in by oppressive values, ways of relating to one another, and ways of doing our work. Exploring such questions or deciding to change how we do our work does not mean that we must compromise our commitment to justice or our passion for the work. In fact, the reverse might actually be true. Exploring these questions could actually renew our commitment and passion as well as help us maintain our sanity and grow our humanity in these uncertain and complex times. It is up to us to define and determine what changing course will mean. Though it's never an easy feat, one of the remarkable things about human beings is our ability to learn, grow, and change how we see and feel about ourselves, others, and the world. This ability is also a quality that instills change work with possibility and gives us hope because if we did not think people could change we would not waste our time doing what we do.

There are several areas we might begin to rethink and talk about as we move forward in this challenging age. Each of these areas, if we are courageous and diligent enough to explore them, promises to not only redefine our work but will likely transform our hearts and minds in the process. Some of the changes include three interconnected and ongoing areas. These involve:

- revisiting our vision, values, and re-humanizing the work we do,

- acknowledging and addressing the limitations of change work based on our existing social categories; and

- re-spiritualizing the work we do and world we want to see.

We must ask ourselves whether we are willing to make the sacrifices and "speak truth to power" in the ways those who came before us did, and we must seek ways to do so collectively.

RE-VISIONING, RE-VALUING, AND RE-HUMANIZING OUR WORK

BEFORE WE CAN begin to change how we think about and do our work we must get clear and regularly revisit the vision and values that drive our work. This calls for open, honest, respectful discussions within and across social change efforts. We have to ask ourselves and one another what it is we want to see unfold as well as what we will and will not do to make it happen. For example, what is the grand vision of today's progressive efforts? Are we creating new ways of being and relating to one another, on individual, group, and institutional levels or getting more people into existing ways of being and relating to one another? Are we working to get a piece of the proverbial pie for ourselves and others or are we interested in making a new pie with fundamentally new ingredients? Are there aspects of existing cultural and institutional life that are worth keeping while others need total transformation? Are we working for issue specific goals, whole-scale social change, or something in between? Are we deconstructing existing constructs? Are we working for a radical revolution of values?

People are at a number of different places when it comes to these questions. Failing to recognize this and understand how it can impede and confuse our work is one of the biggest oversights many of our efforts make. Devoting time and energy to hearing where one another are at, and why we are at the place we are, is necessary and essential for our future effectiveness. Doing so, instead of assuming we are on "*the same page*," might, also, build more of an authentic sense of community and solidarity among us. It might also help us as we move forward and bridge the chasms that exist within and between our efforts.

Connected to the discussion of long-term vision is the discussion of what values drive our work. For example, do some of us think coercive, aggressive tactics such as violent protest, harsh language, anger, rage, or "*by any means necessary*" on the individual and institutional level can bring about substantive social change? Or are we convinced that as change agents we must model the world we want to see as we do our work, no matter the reaction of those we are challenging? This is not a new question, but one that has emerged in most movements for social change. We are convinced that reacting and using oppressive tactics, within and outside our efforts, will not lead us to the world we want to see. This means our attitudes and actions cannot resort to dehumanizing one another or "*othering*" those who experience and see the world differently than us.

A final part of changing how we think about our work and ourselves involves committing to the ongoing and deliberate effort to re-humanize our work. Part of re-humanizing our work involves being deliberate about remembering that no

matter how much we may dislike those we view as enemies or opponents, they are a product of the processes we want to change. Blaming, name-calling, verbal, psychological, and physical violence is misguided, showing that even change agents reduce others' core humanity to what they do and think without much attention to why they act and think the way they do. More importantly, in acting abusive, verbally or physically, we surrender and fall victim to the very processes of dehumanization we want to end and actually help perpetuate oppression instead of interrupting it.

We might also consider that oppression sustains itself by sucking us all in to helping to perpetuate it.

In light of these contradictions, and the power of existing constructs and culture, we must begin to act as if we really believe what separates "*us*" from "*them*" is that we were born into different social arenas. We also might consider whether, ultimately, "*us and them*" exist or just people steeped in very different ways of experiencing and seeing ourselves as well as the world. We might also consider that oppression sustains itself by sucking us all in to helping to perpetuate it.

Realization and change in the way we see and treat others does not mean that we excuse or overlook oppressive attitudes and actions. We cannot and should not. It also does not mean that people are not responsible for their actions, attitudes, and decisions. On the contrary, it means that as we do challenge others, in working to reorient our thinking, we must remember that we are all a work in progress, and any actions that dehumanize others helps to maintain the hate, anger, and violence - the processes we are trying to change. We must learn to do our work in new ways and not be done in by it.

Learning to recognize our faulty thinking and the interconnectedness we share with one another, as well as with our opponents, while not forgetting that we all are simultaneously unique and different, are very big tasks for us. It will require redefining ourselves, as well as how we view others, oppression, and the world. This process points to the fact that transformative change work necessitates a two sided or mutual transformation where we are open to the reality that we too will be changed in the process.

How Far Can Traditional Thinking and Identity Politics Get Us?

How do we overcome the urge to "*dismantle the master's house with the master's tools?*" Where can we find "*new tools*" to affect the change we want to see? Where can we find the fortitude and strength to put into affect new thinking and action, or at least renewed thinking and action? And, how do we sustain ourselves and each other in the process? How do we approach this challenging work in a way that does not leave us hopeless, and that does not turn us into bitter, angry souls? We can do it by reframing and rethinking our work in terms that are not limited to competing constructs and identities. We can do so by better understanding the part we play, and have inherited, in the ongoing struggle for a more just and compassionate world. More importantly, we can do it by re-infusing some form of spiritual or contemplative practice into our work in order to nurture and keep our minds, hearts, and bodies clear about who we are, the work we do, and the world we want to see.

Progressive change agents share the conviction that the social categories of gender, race, and class are obstructive to our goals. We also agree that as human constructions, these categories became embedded in the human psyche, culture, and institutions and continue to shape human relationships and the distribution of power and resources. We would be wise to talk about the limitations and pitfalls of using such constructs to ground our work, a habit that has also caused many a progressive effort to implode or self-destruct as participants fight over who really embodied those constructs, who had a right to be involved, who was really oppressed, who was to lead and who was to follow, who was to speak for a group or movement, whose analysis was right, and who was to define the problem and strategies for addressing it.

The call to recognize and rethink the social categories that much of our work is built upon will likely be one of the most difficult and threatening areas for many of us given our current thinking and the ways we have organized for justice historically. It will be difficult because the history of struggle and change is the history of constructs being reclaimed and reinvented by oppressed groups and those who found themselves defined by others. It will be difficult because these reclaimed and recreated terms and notions of self have literally saved and empowered whole groups and people as they claimed the right to define themselves and their experience. It will be complicated because these reconstituted constructs have further evolved into identities many of us now hold dear and identify ourselves as antiracists, feminists, activists, gay/lesbian/bi-sexual/transgender/queer/intersexed, revolutionaries, anarchists and others. Finally, it will be demanding because these identities and the analyses they involve continue to serve as roadmaps we use to navigate our social worlds. Nonetheless, we must remember that no single term can encompass all a person or group comprises and no map should ever be confused with a destination.

What will our work look like without social categories or with new language and terminology? It may be that we continue to use our current language and simply become more open to its limitations and to expanding definitions when necessary. In the process of changing our thinking, new language will likely emerge to describe the dynamics we face and how we see ourselves today. Regardless, the current age demands that we think about building new kinds of movements, ones where our shared humanity is at the forefront and not limited to potentially divisive constructs.

The call to recognize and rethink the social categories that much of our work is built upon will likely be one of the most difficult and threatening areas for many of us given our current thinking and the ways we have organized for justice historically.

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE AND "RE-SPIRITUALIZING" THE WORK

THE FALLIBILITY AND complexity of the human saga and the work we try to do is a theme that has resonated throughout this document. We are continuously confronted with our own limitations, inconsistencies, bigotries, and pain, pieces of our self that are exposed as we attempt to make a dent in all that needs to be done.

At the same time, these truths also expose the fact that this shared, fallible humanity is what connects us to one another. It's also a commonality that has been distorted, divided, and manipulated by the systems of oppression we are born into, and we unknowingly sustain. The story of the struggle for justice seems to redeem and restore us. In many ways change work is for the redemption, healing, and liberation of us all, whether on an individual, group, national, and global level, and whether one identifies as oppressor or oppressed. It supports us to become more human as we do our work while calling forth the best in ourselves and in others. The adage that "*if one wants to create justice one must be just, if one wants to create peace one must be peaceful*," seems more insightful, profound, and wiser than ever.

Although change always seems to be behind schedule and unnecessary suffering is always with us, understanding and redefining the part we play in the ongoing struggle for justice will be a significant shift in our work and thinking.

As we face the challenges of the work too often we operate from a small sense of time and forget that we are part of something larger than our isolated efforts. We are part of an ongoing community of people who made today's struggle possible. And despite the lip service we sometimes pay to those who have preceded us, we forget that we truly do stand under the shade of trees others have planted. We forget that we have inherited a legacy from our ancestors and that we are inherently connected to them as we move forward and prepare a better day for those who follow us, no matter how incomplete or imperfect our legacy. So rethinking change work means seeing and positioning ourselves in a larger timeless process, one that was in motion when we arrived here and one that will continue after we transition from this life.

Understanding this larger process requires recognition and celebration of the glimpse we have of a more perfect day as we do our work, cross bridges and borders based on social differences, and are changed in the process. If we pay close attention, the work, continuously provides a variety of opportunities to see and feel what a more just world will look. This occurs when we connect with one another on deeper levels, and as we forgive, accept, support, and uplift one another along the way. Often we are too busy or locked into our vision of how things should unfold and

We are continuously confronted with our own limitations, inconsistencies, bigotries, and pain, pieces of our self that are exposed as we attempt to make a dent in all that needs to be done.

It is not for us to define what qualifies as spiritual or what kind of practices, spaces or rituals individuals incorporate into their work. However, thoughtful inclusion of spiritual practices may be one way to become re-grounded. something greater.

where the struggle should be to notice or we have become too discouraged or to harden to care. Consequently, we fail to see the change we make and fail to celebrate the small but important victories we have achieved.

So in addition to learning to do our work for the long-haul, regardless of whether we see the outcomes we want in our life time, we must cultivate a sense of the spiritual/evolving nature of the work we do. Going in a new direction must involve doing more to care for and grow our humanity, both on individual and collective levels. Change work is precarious work on all levels. We should be mindful that it is the nature of oppression to harden us, to turn us into someone we do not like, and to rob us of our compassion if we are not careful.

Because oppression fundamentally is about separating us from our own humanity and the humanity of others, it is time to reincorporate practices, and spaces that renew and reconnect us with that part of ourselves that remains underneath the many roles and identities we wear and operate from. It is not for us to define what qualifies as spiritual or what kind of practices, spaces or rituals individuals incorporate into their work. However, thoughtful inclusion of spiritual practices may be one way to become re-grounded. Practices that involve time, space, silence, and reflection allow us to catch our breath, heal, forgive, and remember that we are part of something greater. Such space and time will help accomplish multiple things. It might help us remember that like others we too are imperfect and we might need to grow and change. It might enable us to muster the courage to explore ourselves, and acknowledge how we hurt, judge, and critique others. Such space and time may foster not only individual but collective healing as we make room for the pain that festers and so often gets in the way of the work. It may help us find the cure that is in the pain we carry.

SO WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO?
WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

I N CLOSING, we reiterate the central questions that have guided our reflections on the state of contemporary social change work and leave you with much to think about. Will we continue to do the same things expecting different results? Can we reframe the work we do in the larger context of the human struggle? Can we be deliberative about changing our thinking and actions? Will we reclaim and value time for spiritual growth and contemplation?

It is our wish that consideration of the questions we pose will renew hope and a sense of historical place as we work for change.

Can we reframe the work we do in the larger context of the human struggle?

AFTERWORD

IN A SPEECH given in 2001, activist Grace Lee Boggs noted the following: "*King's unique contribution as a philosopher, preacher and a gifted orator enabled him to tie non-violent direct action inseparably to the vision of the Beloved Community and thereby give the struggle in Montgomery the prophetic dimension and universality that are necessary to launch a movement.*" In so doing, she observed, "*Dr. King has also given us some invaluable guidelines on movement building:*

1 *He is very clear that suffering and oppression are not enough to create a movement. A movement begins when the oppressed stop seeing themselves just as victims and began seeing themselves as pioneers in creating a society based on new, more humane relationships and thus advancing the evolution of the human race.*

2 *Movement-builders are able to recognize the humanity in others, including their opponents, and therefore are able to see within themselves the possibility of being transformed. They choose to struggle non-violently because they know that non-violent struggles can become swords that heal, while violent struggles work toward increasing the hate, fear and bitterness in the world.*

3 *Movement-builders are genuinely conscious of the need to go beyond slogans to create programs that transform and empower participants. The Montgomery Bus Boycott, for example, created an alternative self-reliant transportation system.*

4 *At the heart of movement-building is the concept of two-sided transformation, both of ourselves and of our institutions.*

5 *Movement-builders can accept contradictions that develop in the course of the struggle. Great movements create great hopes but they also lead to great disappointments.*"
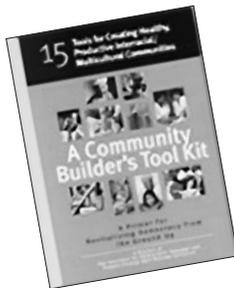
RELATED PROJECT CHANGE
REPORTS AND RESOURCES

*Lessons Learned,*
*Planning an Anti-Racism Initiative**

Lessons Learned,
*Project Change in Action **

Training for Racial Equity and Inclusion: A Guide to Selected Programs,*
written by Ilana Shapiro, Ph.D; produced by Project Change and Aspen
Institute Roundtable on Comprehensive Community Initiatives for Children
and Families, in consultation with Center for Assessment and Policy
Development, 2002

A Community Builder's Toolkit:15 Tips for Creating Healthy,
Productive Multicultural Interracial Communities;* produced by
the Institute for Democratic Renewal and Project Change
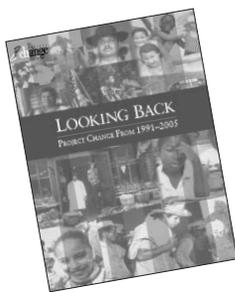
Looking Back: Project Change From 1991-2005,* co-authored by
Sally Leiderman and Shirley Strong, produced by Project Change

Anti-Racist Work: An Examination and Assessment of Organizational Activity,
written by Gary Delgado, principal investigator, Applied Research Center.

* available at www.projectchange.org

Institute for Democratic Renewal
Claremont Graduate University
Claremont, CA 91711
909-607-9220 | 909-607-9221
www.race-democracy.org

Project Change
4100 Redwood Road, Suite 351
Oakland, CA 94619
510-875-5596
www.projectchange.org