

Privilege Perpetuates Oppression

by V. Spike Peterson

In this fraught year of clearly mounting crises, resistances to oppression and demands for social change are mounting. We need to understand the power relations that underpin these crises, reproduce oppression, and thereby obstruct systemic social change. What we lack are studies of privilege, which is the structural corollary of oppression: each is a product of and produces the other. Social transformation is stymied when those with privilege do not – or will not – recognize and take responsibility for how they are advantaged and how they reproduce inequalities, sometimes consciously but also, unconsciously.

To clarify: Studies of oppression prioritize documenting, and demanding accountability for the immense suffering caused by intentional acts of stigmatization, discrimination, exclusion and violence. This crucial work enables us to “see” the scale of human harms but not the institutionalized, internalized patterns of thought and action that underpin and enable the unconscious and habitual reproduction of social systems, including their oppressive dynamics. Without attention to social structures, we are unable to “see” how systemic power relations and social patterns reproduce inequalities, even when that is not consciously intended. Similarly, when hierarchies are institutionalized, being privileged or oppressed has less to do with individual actions or intentions than how one is structurally “positioned” within a social system. Those who are privileged may recognize and even actively protest how “other” groups are oppressed, yet fail to register the corollary of how this systemically benefits privileged groups. Individualist thinking misleads us: it presumes oppressive consequences are solely an effect of willfully harmful intentions, rather than a systemic effect of institutionalized and reinforced patterns of thought and action favored by those who benefit most.

Privilege is structural, but also complicated: sites of privilege differ — racism, heterosexism, nationalism, ableism — the advantages of privilege vary — self-esteem, authority, security, resources — and contexts always shape which forms of privilege “matter” and how participants interact. But the crucial point — and what makes privilege systemically powerful and problematic — is that in every case those who are privileged can, and do, take for granted unearned advantages that load the odds in their favor and at the expense of those not favored. This effectively, and often dramatically, tilts the playing field so that those who are oppressed must participate (by definition) in a relentlessly “uphill struggle” and with fewer advantages or resources.

While oppressed groups cannot afford to ignore power relations, those with privilege enjoy the extraor-

dinary advantage of “choosing” whether and to what extent they “notice” injustice, “bother” with critical reflection, or

engage in fighting oppression. For those who choose activism the challenges vary. Systemic transformation logically requires that those with privilege “lose” all unearned advantages, including presumptions of “natural” superiority and entitlement.

For example, racism's history centers on Western imperialist powers brutally exploiting the land and labor of “Others.” This domination is legitimated by evolutionary narratives of “white” (European) superiority, and characterized by oppressive cultural and spatial segregation. Similarly, male domination over and exploitation of women's reproductive, productive, sexual, and emotional labor is legitimated by religious and “scientific” claims of male superiority. It is characterized by legislatively defined and enforced male heterosexual/familial/household arrangements.

Thus any systemic transformation towards a fair and just society primarily entails whites “losing” dominance in political and economic power. It also entails males “losing” their privileged male “identity” and their vast unearned benefits of sexual/gendered divisions of desire, labor, authority and power in private as well as public domains.

Analyzing complex systems of privilege and how we all participate is a daunting challenge, but one we cannot avoid when a fair and just society is our goal. Given their disproportionate share of decision-making power, those with privilege are pivotal for shaping how — or whether — lasting change occurs.

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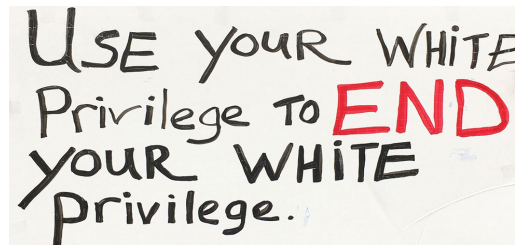


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The Partnership Model

Excerpted from an article by Rianne Eisler, in Kosmos: Journal of Global Transformation.

Cultural transformation requires accurate stories about “human nature.” The message of many stories we inherited from earlier times is that dominating or being dominated are our only alternatives. But findings from neuroscience demonstrate that, though we humans have the capacity for cruelty and violence, we are actually “wired” more for empathic and caring relationships.

Spreading this knowledge about human nature requires a concerted effort. The struggle for our future is not between religion and secularism, right and left, East and West, or capitalism and socialism, but within all these societies between traditions of domination and a partnership way of life.

These changes in language and stories have enormous implications for all aspects of life, including spirituality and morality. Rather than being used to coerce, dominate, and all too often kill, morality is imbued with caring and love. Spirituality is no longer an escape to otherworldly realms from the suffering inherent in a domination world, but an active engagement in creating a better world right here on Earth — a world where peace is a normal state, rather than merely an interval between wars.

Every one can play a role in the cultural transformation from domination to partnership. Working together, we can build the foundations for a more peaceful, equitable, sustainable world.