

Role of the Oppressor in Social Change

Louise 5

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[Note: In this essay, the words we, us, and our refer to white Americans (U.S. residents) who benefit from colonial privileges derived from the enslavement of Africans, the theft of land from Native peoples, and our ongoing discrimination of them. Imperium denotes the global corporate-state empire of Western Europe and North America and its continuing colonialism.]

We could focus for a long time on mastering our complicity with the harms of the Imperium by uprooting our exceptionalism and turning toward the spirit and Earth Interbeing. It takes a great effort to do this inner work and generations for white people and those we oppressed to heal from how our colonialism has deeply harmed cultures and Earth Interbeing. Yet, in the meantime, if sufficiently dedicated to doing this inner work, we can take small careful steps toward restoring the harmony and balance of the Earth Interbeing, as long as we keep aware that we remain a work in progress.

However, before acting in the world, we need to move away from behaving like privileged white educated western people. Blacks have made a great effort to explain all the ways we discriminate against them, even if we should view ourselves as their allies. Paulo Freire described what white privileged people who want to ally with the oppressed must understand. When we join liberation struggles, we generally act like colonizers. Oppression does not cease by just wishing it away. We do not stop acting like an oppressor just by acknowledging our privileges.

Freire describes what he calls the marks of an oppressor, behaviors of privileged white people wanting to free others of oppression. Looking backward, I see these marks within my social change work and in the social change work of other white privileged people.

White privileged people believe we must lead the social transformation. We believe we hold the revolutionary wisdom and vision that we must bestow upon the oppressed and fully expect them to follow our lead. As a result, we act for the oppressed rather than with them in the struggle. Unsurprisingly, we find it hard to relinquish power to others.

White privileged social change activists want to control the message. By imposing our ideas on those we seek to liberate, we manipulate them. We feel uncomfortable with the demands of oppressed people – reparations, land back, end of US dumping of food commodities in Third World Countries – and suggest softer options to remove from the table threats to our privileges.

While we may want to struggle with the oppressed to overcome oppression, at the end of the day, we go home to enjoy our comforts that our white privileges afford us. We tightly hold on to our privileges. We might stop our overtly exploitive and indifferent behaviors, but our privileges rooted in exceptionalism deform us and defeat our aspirations.

White educated privileged social change activists have seemingly no power to overcome the Imperium. Whatever we do either does not make a difference or makes the situation even more dire. Some activists have brazenly adopted Imperial methods to further their agenda. What we have tried persistently fails to work, yet we persistently try again using the same strategies under a new name.

Which brings us back to a spiritual theory of change, a worldview that has worked for Indigenous peoples for tens of thousands of years to sustain their culture, their land, language, and relationships with Earth and life. But it feels as if we have our noses pressed against a window looking in on a world that we as white educated privileged cannot enter because of our toxic world view.

We cannot cross the threshold into a holistic and sustainable world until we have affirmed the sacredness of creation and have removed ourselves as the primary purpose of creation. As long as we believe in the story that we have the god-given right to dominate and exploit people and all life different from us and to relentlessly extract from the Earth what benefits us, then we will continue to cause the problems that we seek to overcome. Our arrogance and fear of losing our arrogated privileges bar us from the path that will allow us to move with creation sustainably and reverently through this planetary catastrophe we have created.

We as white, privileged, western, and educated have to heal ourselves of our Eurocentrism, anthropocentrism, and all the other spiritual diseases that end with –ism. Writing these essays has starkly shown me my deep entanglement with so many of them. Yet I focus on Eurocentrism and anthropocentrism as they for centuries have justified colonialism, racism, and devastation of the Earth Interbeing. Pull out these two perverse beliefs by their roots, and many symptoms will disappear.

The dark of the year invites us to turn toward the spirit, which I intend to do. In the new year, I will return and continue this conversation with you in some way. I tried to encourage Bessie to change her mind about coming back, but she feels that she has said enough. She does not want to tell us what we must do as we have to figure that out ourselves. If you want to explore the I Ching on your own, you can learn how to consult the I Ching [here](#).¹

Before I do retreat, I want to leave with you some of my thoughts about what we can do while remaining fully aware of our complicity. First, we can find ways to stop harming the Earth Interbeing. Reducing red meat and holiday consumerism will give Earth a break from ever more extraction of its resources. Increase your support of cooperatives. We can follow the lead of the oppressed in their calls for action and learn more about how we can further global food sovereignty. Read and regularly reread [this list](#) (p. 14)² of anti-racism qualities. Donate to the [Indian Land Tenure Foundation](#)³ to buy back tribal reservation lands. Teach other people your

¹ <https://wayofhumanity.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/I-Ching-Instructions.pdf>

² <https://www.safehousealliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Tools-for-Liberation-Packet-SPAN.pdf>

³ <https://iltf.org/special-initiatives/land-recovery/>

sustainability skills. Have conversations with family and friends about white complicity and privileges. Act in ways that challenge our complicity and put us on the road to healing.

May you explore your spiritual being and come to know the sacredness of the Earth Interbeing. As the Buddhists say, "Hatred never ceases with hatred, but by love alone is healed, it is the ancient and eternal way."

Much love. And may we all have a wise, loving, joyful, and just new year.

Louise