

**Amplifying Critical Consciousness via Intersectionality:
A North Carolinian Alliance's Fight Against Amendment One**

Freirian pedagogy offers a problem-posing model of education where individuals “develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves” (Freire 2012, 12). Through this critical consciousness, the oppressed “come to see the world not as a static reality but as a reality in the process of transformation,” a reality they develop for themselves, versus one that is imposed upon them (12). Critical consciousness is the first and perhaps most fundamental step towards achieving social justice (Alexander 2012, 15). In fact, if this consciousness arose with no element of criticality, there would be no effort towards social justice, for the oppressed would remain passive to false, dominant narratives, ideologies, and institutions. It is when this consciousness is awoken, and a reality once perceived as truth is critically acknowledged as one that is false and transformable that an individual can subsequently act on his/her critical consciousness. However, as Freire notes, critical consciousness is not an individualized project, it is one that necessitates dialogue and camaraderie. As Freire states, “When [the oppressed] discover within themselves the yearning to be free, they perceive that this yearning can be transformed into reality only when the same yearning is aroused in their comrades” (2012, 47). Therefore, critical consciousness is, at once, individual and collective.

Pedagogy of the Oppressed is an excellent theoretical foundation for engaging in meaningful dialogic practice. Many of its principles are implemented in various educational settings, where the aim is to engage individuals in dialogue that builds a mutual understanding of humanity based on personalized yet relatable experiences. The aim is not to isolate modes of oppression, but to identify where oppression exists and how it can be collectively overcome, and ultimately eradicated. However, this process is much easier said than done. Much of our individualized identities, our senses of self, are attached to various communities, or sites of belonging, and for very long, the oppressive forces within these various communities have, much to our detriment, strategically and successfully isolated our various senses of self. When thinking of socially constructed categories like race, gender, sexuality, socioeconomic class, and so forth, they are often fragmented, especially in the fight against marginalization within these categories. This is especially evident within the United States nonprofit sector, where millions of organizations and entities exist to alleviate harsh social conditions on an issue-by-issue basis. This fragmentation is an unfortunate product of a deliberate strategy, employed by oppressive forces, to divide and rule.

Freire describes the divide and rule tactic as antidialogical action “done by varied means, from the repressive methods of government bureaucracy to forms of cultural action... [that place] emphasis on a focalized view of problems rather than on seeing them as dimensions of a totality” (Freire 2012, 141). By isolating these various modes of oppression as distinct, individualized occurrences, efforts towards overcoming oppression operate in silos, and the oppressed grow further distant from the very cross-issue unity they need to achieve freedom from oppression altogether. On the ground, it is indeed overwhelming, that is, the very idea of working to fight oppression in multiple realms. However, it only takes recognition that this fragmentation is a deliberate means to keep people separated, since unity threatens the

dominant positioning of oppressive forces. As Freire notes, "...focalized forms of action, by intensifying the focalized way of life of the oppressed...hamper the oppressed from perceiving the reality critically and keep them isolated from the problems of [the oppressed] in other areas" (142). As has been indicated through many major social movements in the United States over the past several decades, successful movements have multi-issue collaboration at their core.

Michelle Alexander demonstrates this in *The New Jim Crow*, where she traces the many modes of institutionalized racism in the United States from slavery to the contemporary mass incarceration of African Americans, under the guise of a supposed "War on Drugs." The antagonistic division of racial groups throughout American history, to the present day, has been achieved through the strategically employed divide and rule tactics of White European colonizers, a group that has evolved over time but remains more or less dominant in every aspect of American life, including (and most importantly) in government. This is especially detrimental to oppressed populations because they are left powerless in the face of discriminatory policy, which further subjugates them to a false reality in which they are already deeply entrenched. As one can imagine, there are immense psychosocial implications, and the path towards liberation is made longer and more arduous. However, as Alexander notes, the power of cross-group, cross-issue collaboration becomes an incredibly strong means of fighting back. She demonstrates this through the success of the Civil Rights Movement:

[It] began to evolve into a "Poor People's Movement," it promised to address not only black poverty, but white poverty as well—thus raising the specter of a poor and working-class movement that cut across racial lines. Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights leaders made it clear that they viewed the eradication of economic inequality as the next front in the "human rights movement" and made great efforts to build multiracial coalitions that sought economic justice for all (Alexander 2012, 39).

By recognizing an oppression that spanned a number of groups, the Civil Rights Movement was able to mobilize diverse groups toward a common goal. This unified effort was not the first of its kind—it had been preceded by others quite like it. The contexts, however, varied each time. It wasn't until the early 1980s that formal discourse arose around the notion of what is now referred to as intersectionality.

Intersectionality addresses the issue of fragmentation on both an individual and collective level. Recognizing our individual identities are comprised of multiple senses of self, occurring all at once and never once at a time, allows us to not only acknowledge our whole selves at all times, but also allows us to move beyond ourselves to collectively organize on a much larger scale. Activist/poet Eli Clare roots intersectionality in feminists of color discourse of the late 20th century.

...[Women] of color were developing, writing about, and acting upon a tremendously exciting intersectional politic...African-American feminists, many of whom were lesbians, were doing groundbreaking analysis on issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality...I started to understand just how inseparable gender, race, class, and sexuality are...It started with feminists of colour—both contemporary and historical—being really fierce about their experiences of white supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism (*Resisting...* 2009, 46).

As indicated through Clare’s statement above, recognition of intersectionality for feminists of color in the 1980s arose through the acknowledgement and critical analysis of experiencing multiple modes of oppression all at once. In this sense, one mode of oppression is never independent of another. The notion of intersectionality is incredibly important to not only awakening but also sustaining critical consciousness, especially at a time like now when social injustice is nuanced and seemingly unconquerable. The fact of the matter is sociocultural evolution has blinded us from the fundamental fact that we are actually not that different from one another—what ties us all together, beneath socially constructed categories, is the fact that we are all human. Therefore, oppression in any form is ultimately a threat to humanity as a whole.

Intersectionality lies at the core of 21st century social change initiatives. It can be perceived as a means of amplifying critical consciousness to combat multiple and more nuanced modes of oppression that plague current and future generations. The power of intersectionality is beautifully demonstrated in a 2013 documentary film entitled *All of Us North Carolina: The Queer of Color Fight Against Amendment One*. In May 2012, Amendment One, a family discrimination constitutional amendment, was presented on the North Carolina state ballot. The Amendment essentially stated that the only domestic union that would be legally recognized in North Carolina is a marriage between a man and a woman. The documentary is about a grassroots alliance of North Carolinians who, as listed on the alliance’s website, “stick up for each other when any of [them] has [their] humanity questioned.” Beyond this incredible mission statement, the alliance leveraged the campaign against Amendment One as an opportunity to mobilize individuals to not only vote, but to also build a stronger, unified base for the purpose of mobilizing even more individuals in the future.

All of Us North Carolina was primarily filmed in Durham, North Carolina and opens with a voiceover call to action from Reverend Dr. William J. Barber II, President of the North Carolina chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). He states:

We need to stick together and push our people’s agenda. Healthcare for all. Getting racism out of our law enforcement system. Getting good jobs for all. Decent housing and education. And in the midst of these real crises, some of the same ultra conservative forces who have been trying to roll back our civil rights, who have fought us at every effort, are now trying to divide our vote. The reality is gay marriage is already illegal in North Carolina. The reality is, however you feel about same sex marriage, you should always be against putting hate and division and discrimination into the very heart and framework of our Constitution. So we’re calling on you to vote against discrimination, to vote against hate, and to vote against this trick Amendment One.

From the beginning, viewers are alerted that this film is very much about intersectionality. Members of All of Us North Carolina (All of Us NC) and Southerners On New Ground (SONG) appear making excellent points about the ease with which the purpose of the Amendment can be misconstrued. For instance, Nia Martin Robinson, student at Bennett College and member of All of Us NC states, “It’s not just about marriage. It’s not just about sexuality. It is about civil rights, human rights, and equal protection under the law.” Caitlin Breedlove, Co-Director of SONG, mentions the Amendment “sounds like it’s about gay marriage, but it’s actually about

taking rights away from any unmarried people.” As one can see, the divide and rule politics of government bureaucracy is at play through the misleading nature and ambiguity of the Amendment. However, members of the alliance make clear that this is a deliberate tactic that is intended to separate people into issue-based silos. As Jade Brooks, Regional Coordinator of All of Us NC and member of SONG, rightfully acknowledges, “You’re attacking our dignity as humans and we’re using this campaign to lift up how viscous your attacks are and how the Constitution should be about protecting human rights.” This aligns itself well with Freire, who states, “To surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity” (Freire 2012, 47). This critical consciousness is deeply rooted in the guiding philosophy of All of Us North Carolina.

At one of the many rallies featured in the film, All of Us NC Co-Founder Manju Rajendran announces to her audience and fellow All of Us members that “the most important thing...after we vote against [Amendment One] is that we stay in the fight beyond...that we’re willing to stand up for immigrant rights, that we’re willing to stand up for workers rights, that we’re willing to stand against injustice of every form.” This is not only a perfect demonstration of intersectionality, but also the use of this notion to amplify critical consciousness, by mobilizing individuals and existing organizations across issues. In the film, intersectionality is explicitly listed as one of six elements used in the alliance’s organizing strategy. They are as follows:

- **Relational organizing**, which is a grassroots level of organizing through one-on-one, face-to-face interactions, focuses on building relationships first and organizing after. Relational organizing lays the foundation, not necessarily for issues-based activism, but for cultural shifts. As All of Us NC and SONG member Serena Sebring mentions, by sharing stories, harms are made visible. [This, too, is noted by Eli Clare who reinforces the power of sharing stories. He mentions, “So much of what we know in various communities about resistance has come through story. It is through listening to and collecting stories that we begin to notice oppressive patterns and systems and develop strategies of rebellion and resistance (2009, 49).]
- **Popular education**, which is very much rooted in Freirian pedagogy entails a process of raising consciousness, making learning accessible and participatory. The film itself demonstrates this method through the transformational self-awareness experienced by many of the individuals who were involved in the campaign against Amendment One, who were able to understand larger social issues through their very own experiences.
- **Galvanizing movement building infrastructure**, which is about bringing organizations across issues together behind a particular fight to demonstrate the power of multi-racial, multi-issue alliances. Again, the idea is to leverage existing organizing individuals, events, and entities to build a stronger coalition against all modes of oppression.
- **Base building**, which is about educating a social base in such a way that any time one community is attacked, individuals within that base stick up for reach other and fight back en masse.
- **Leadership development of marginalized people**, which builds up a new crop of organizers who become involved in bigger justice movements; and lastly,
- **Intersectionality**, where no one experiences just class, or just race, or just gender, or just sexuality at a time. The idea is that you are always these things simultaneously, and you cannot divide what is always together. As Manju states, these things are “not in

conflict with each other, they are actually part of a bigger trajectory of justice.”

This six-principle strategy is an excellent model that demonstrates the amplification of critical consciousness through intersectionality. Although operationalized at a grassroots level, it has significant potential to create transformational impact on a much larger scale.

Unfortunately, at the end of the voting day, on May 8, 2012, the Amendment received a 59-41 majority in its favor. However, as Kai Lumumba Barrow, Senior Strategist of SONG, mentioned, “We wanted to win that way, but the reality is that we won a different way.” Caitlin Breedlove pointed out, “It’s important to always keep in mind decisions like this, from a political level, are overturned. They go back and forth, they can change dramatically based on judicial proceedings, all kinds of things. But the transformation that happens for people. That lasts.” That same night, after the votes were tallied, organizers and alliance members gathered to do a community walk with as much strength and vigor as they had demonstrated in the previous weeks they had spent organizing. In fact, the very next day, despite the temporary sadness of the loss, All of Us members traveled from all over North Carolina to take part in a multi-organization rally against Bank of America. What this demonstrates is that mobilizing goes beyond winning isolated legal rights. As Freire notes, “The solution is not to ‘integrate’ [the oppressed] into the structure of oppression, but to transform the structure so that they can become ‘beings for themselves’” (74). The power of enhancing critical consciousness via intersectionality is that, as Noah Rubin-Blöse, Founder of Bread Uprising (part of the All of Us NC Coalition) reflected, “When we stand up for each other, it allows us to stand up for ourselves more,” and this wonderfully demonstrates what Freire illuminates as the transformative becoming of beings for ourselves.

Bibliography

Alexander, Michelle. 2012. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: The New Press.

All of Us North Carolina: The Queer of Color Fight Against Amendment One. 2013. Directed by Sowjanya Kudva. SowjFilms.

Freire, Paulo. 2012 (reprint). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum.

“Resisting Easy Answers: Intersectional Politics and Multi-Issue Organizing: An Interview with Eli Clare.” 2009. *Upping the Anti: A Journal of Theory and Action* 9: 45-59.