

Stir It Up - Rinku Sen

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### The Centrality of Race and Gender

While colonialism, white supremacy, and patriarchy have been with us throughout modern times, they take on new and innovative forms today. Race and gender are social constructions: the biological and scientific differences among people are negligible and do not justify the use of these categories in discriminatory ways. Some activists conclude that we therefore should not focus on racial and gender differences in our organizing, but I would argue that the significance of these false categories makes it even more important to do so. However they were constructed, they now produce life-threatening conditions for millions worldwide. Lack of a sophisticated analysis that includes an understanding of the dynamic character-

istics of racism and sexism helps conservatives split our base and stymies the search for solutions and strategies that help everyone. It is tempting to account for racial and gender divisions with economic analysis, and it is even accurate to do so to a certain extent. But race and gender systems operate independently of the economy also, and subsuming them under an economic unifier retards our efforts to strip them of their power. I would argue that economic, political, and cultural ideas and systems are intertwined and need to be addressed together. If the world became socialist today, racism would still vilify certain people, and women would still get raped.

## Racism

While economic motivations seem to have led to racial categorization initially, historically white supremacy produced psychological, cultural, and political benefits for whites in addition to the material—a set of benefits I would argue few whites are ready to give up, even if the economic benefits were removed. Certainly, our current economy bears the legacy of the white supremacy that has formed the base of U.S. capitalism since the nation's earliest days. For British colonizers, a large, cheap labor force was crucial for rapid expansion of their economic and political power. The indigenous population had been decimated or alienated by war, and the availability of vast amounts of land “open” to settlement made it difficult to rely on British immigrant labor. Although indentured servitude did provide one limited source of labor, the enslavement of American Indians and Africans created a far more profitable labor force. In addition to economic enslavement, however, the pseudoscientific effort to characterize these populations as sub-human justified reproductive, cultural, and political actions such as rape, the outlawing of religious practices and native languages, forced Christianization, and the takeover of land (Davis, 1983). These cultural and political controls on people of color would continue throughout U.S. history, eventually taking on a life of their own even when they ran counter to profitable economic policy.

Although the early waves of eastern and southern European immigrants experienced substantial exploitation, they were eventually integrated into a standard white identity that brought with it educational, cultural, and political rights still often denied in practice to people of color in the United States. The industrial economy required a flexible, mobile, and efficient labor force. Eastern and southern European immigrants peopled this early industrial labor force. For the most part, they planned to return to their homelands, so they invested little into integrating with U.S. culture or organizing to improve conditions. They were non-citizens subject to deportation. They were frequently used as strikebreakers and in deskilling because they were assigned the simpler elements of complicated jobs

that were redesigned by scientific management (a system of breaking down the production of an item into its smallest repetitive tasks) and the introduction of the assembly line. However, these immigrants eventually controlled the skilled-trades unions and slowly rose to economic and political power (Ignatiev, 1995). That option was unavailable to obviously nonwhite immigrants, who were welcomed for their labor but were barred from joining unions, becoming citizens, and building families because of antimiscegenation and antiwomen immigration policy. Even when the United States was flooded with European immigrants, Europe was never part of a barred zone, and, after industrialization, immigrants from Europe were never enslaved, never brought in for menial labor through guest-worker programs, and never made ineligible for citizenship.

By contrast, the United States took great pains to ensure that nonwhite immigrants would not taint the emerging white culture. Immigration law prohibited the entry and settlement of women and children in order to control the reproduction of immigrant culture, and it excluded nonwhite groups altogether when the need for their labor passed. After Asians had built railroads and staffed mining booms and the beginning of industrialization, the Chinese Exclusion Act, the first federal law prohibiting immigration from any part of the world, set the stage for limiting immigration from all of Asia. Mexican workers were brought in through the bracero program to work in agriculture but were denied the basic rights of permanent residents and citizens. When black descendants of slaves could not be controlled through immigration policy, Jim Crow, criminal justice, and welfare policies were brought to bear on them.

Even the liberalization of immigration and other economic policies came with a cultural, political, and economic price. For example, the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1965 liberalized quota policies and led to the most significant Asian immigration of the twentieth century. In addition to removing quotas, the new law eliminated quotas imposed in earlier laws, allowed family reunification, and set preferences for recruitment of professionals and technicians. But, by allowing the entry of unprecedented numbers of professional Asian immigrants, the state, in effect, selected a group of people for success; this policy led to the creation of the stereotype of the "model minority," the assumption that all Asians were naturally inclined to intellectual and scientific pursuits. Because of this myth, later Asian immigrants, from Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, and China, as well as South Asia, would find it difficult to get anyone, including themselves, to believe that their needs mirrored those of blacks and Latinos.

Race continues to play a role in contemporary social and political, as well as economic, policy. For example, a volley of laws since the mid-1980s has placed immigrants under economic and cultural attack. Three are particularly important: the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, which imposed employer

sanctions; California Proposition 187 and the Personal Responsibility Act, which made all immigrants ineligible for welfare benefits, food stamps, and Social Security; and the 1996 Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act, which imposed restrictions and mandatory sentencing on suspected terrorists. People of color are continually attacked through crime policy, particularly the War on Drugs, and education policy, as in the attacks on affirmative action, multicultural education, and the defunding of public schools.

### Sexism

Economic and social policies have also made women second-class citizens, subservient to men. Throughout postindustrial history, women's labor has been systematically undervalued and discounted, and they have received low wages for any work resembling that which they accomplished during their unpaid time at home. For white women, changing views of their roles accompanied industrialization, as production moved from the home to the factory, where men went to work for wages. The home was stripped of its productive value and was transformed into a place of leisure and nurturing. This separation of public and private spheres controlled the aspirations and identities of white women, while it defined and devalued women's work in general.

"True womanhood" among white women was upheld by the racial order. Much of the domestic work in white upper- and middle-class households was done by servants from lower-class and nonwhite communities, and their labor maintained the myth of natural, easy domesticity among white women. Government agencies and educational institutions were specifically established to channel ex-slaves and their descendants into domestic work throughout the South and East. Works Progress Administration programs in the Southwest and Midwest trained young Latinas, both U.S.-born and immigrant, for domestic work, although officials already knew that such work did not allow young women to escape poverty.

Women were considered a flexible and cheap workforce, but it was the cultural and political constraints on them that allowed them to be easily pulled and pushed in and out of the paid labor force. White women entering the workforce found a gender ghetto, where jobs took on a lesser value than they had when they belonged to men. An excellent example is the transformation of clerical work, which had historically been a prestigious professional training ground for men. Labor shortages among men caused by the Civil War and expanded opportunities for men in the new giant corporations forced employers to seek clerical workers from among the increasing numbers of literate, young, white women. In an unhappy coincidence the entry of women into the clerical field was accompanied by the introduction of scientific management. Scientific management allowed the

division of tasks to suit unskilled and replaceable labor, seen most prevalently in the factory assembly line, and also allowed the transformation of the secretary and clerical worker from future businessman to worker. At the same time, a new innovation, the typewriter, had not been associated with men. Rather than being seen as workers or bosses, clerical workers were considered more like office wives. They were treated according to the mores of a patriarchal family, and they did not rebel against that position for more than seventy years after the profession went female. The presence of women in clerical work introduced and made acceptable a discriminatory wage in that field. If women had not already been made culturally subservient to men, such discrimination would have been far less likely or possible.

Discriminatory wages are to be found all over our economy. For example, because U.S. society does not count child rearing as work and assigns it exclusively to women, women who are home health care and child care workers are paid low wages. A study conducted by the AFL-CIO and the Institute for Women's Policy Research shows that workers in female-dominated occupations are paid roughly 18 percent less than they would be if they worked in jobs requiring similar skills outside the "pink ghetto." If pay were raised in female-dominated jobs to levels comparable to those in the rest of the economy, the study concluded, twenty-five million women would together earn about \$89 billion a year more than they do now, and four million men would gain \$25 billion a year. The study estimates that pay equity would lift out of poverty more than half of poor single mothers over eighteen and three-fifths of poor, married women (Moberg, 2001).

In addition to being economically disadvantaged, women are also the targets of cultural and political attacks. The shaping of gender identity through cultural institutions such as the family, schools, religion, and the arts contributes to lower performances by girls in middle school than in elementary school and to an ongoing epidemic of sexual abuse and violence worldwide. Political attacks on reproductive freedom continue unabated. Women do not enjoy political representation nearly at parity with their numbers, and they are largely kept out of the highest levels of education and business. And one form of punishment for women's stepping outside the bounds of traditional family structures is the fact that the United States is one of only two industrialized countries that lack universal child care (Crittenden, 2001).

### **The Confluence of Race and Gender: Welfare Reform**

Welfare reform shows us how racial, gender, and economic systems come together. The fact that the different goals of welfare reform often contradict one another points to the independence of each system as well as their interdependence. On gender, welfare policies have been designed to keep women of various racial

groups in their "proper" domestic or economic roles—married to a man or working for a man, depending on who you are. Welfare programs were first started to help white women stay at home if they lost their husbands; they thereby reinforced a family ethic by replacing a male breadwinner and patriarch with the state. Since then, much of welfare policy has resulted in controlling the sexuality of poor women. Today, that control is coded into the welfare system through such policies as the family cap, abstinence-only sex education, and the prohibition on using government aid to pay for abortion, along with policies aimed at reducing out-of-wedlock births. Welfare policy has provided a window through which conservatives have been able to gain public support for reproductive controls. Once they apply to the poor and to people of color, it's only a matter of time before they affect everybody. If President George W. Bush wins the next welfare war, welfare programs will reduce funds for child care and income support and redirect them to schemes for promoting marriage.

On race, the welfare system has undergone a long transformation by which various need-based programs became racially stratified. Over the years, Social Security and unemployment insurance were separated from welfare, food stamps, and health care programs for children, the disabled, and the elderly. Programs that excluded the majority of black and women workers came to be seen as universal, while programs that served people of color and women were targeted and attacked as "special" support for the undeserving. Individual states adopted regulations and practices to curtail the number of blacks on the welfare rolls and to control black women's sexual behavior; these programs tested ideas that provide the groundwork for much of today's federal policy. Conservatives agitated public opinion through racial stereotyping and a concentrated focus on the fears of white, middle- and working-class taxpayers. The deep racialization of welfare obscures for many white people their self-interest in preserving safety nets. Sociologist Dorothy Roberts (1997) recalls the story of a white woman in Louisiana, on welfare herself, who became convinced by conservative rhetoric that black people were using welfare to avoid working for a living. As a result, the woman voted for white supremacist David Duke in his gubernatorial bid because Duke vowed to end welfare programs.

In the 1990s, scapegoating immigrants through welfare policy constituted both racial and reproductive attack. Prior to the mid-1980s, most political attacks on immigrants emphasized economic threats, with images of immigrants stealing jobs and undercutting wages. But the later political rhetoric portrayed immigrants as dependent on public benefits and a drain on the public coffer and in doing so shifted the attack from male workers to women and children. A 1986 CBS/New York Times poll found that 47 percent of Americans believed that "most immigrants wind up on welfare" (Chang, 2000, p. 201). In California, Governor Pete

Wilson made controlling public expenditures on immigrants a central feature of his administration. In a 1992 administrative report on the state's budget, Wilson called immigrants "tax receivers," referring to their supposedly disproportionate use of welfare, Medicaid, and public schools (Chang, 2000). Proposition 187-type exclusions were proposed in Washington, New York, Florida, and Oregon. At the same time as women's sexuality and family formation were being crafted through welfare policy, stringent work requirements and the privatization of welfare programs created out of poor women and their children a steady pool of low-wage workers, obviously a great boon to business, especially if hiring these women brought a cash incentive.

### Implications for Progressive Organizing

The continuation of racism and sexism holds significant implications for our organizing because the ideas behind these systems split our base and prevent us from building a universal commitment to fighting all forms of oppression. The media and public policies constantly point out and reinforce our differences in status and carefully shape our impressions of "the other" so that we will support discriminatory policies. People who are normally loathe to treat anyone badly are willing to tolerate and participate in such treatment because they have become convinced that the target population deserves it or will actually benefit from it. While many of us can build organizations that are multiracial or are even composed mainly of people of color by using the argument that we're all in the same boat, most of us don't experience life that way. We are not, in fact, all in exactly the same boat—there are crucial differences in our treatment by major institutions. Black students get suspended from school for fighting, and white children don't. Women are expected to do the housework, and men are not. Legal immigrants can work and organize without fear, and undocumented immigrants cannot. A husband can go into the emergency room when his wife is ill, but a lesbian life partner cannot. These are not false differences, and people find it hard to stick to the same-boat argument when confronted with them. Thus, less marginal communities and people within these communities become reluctant to stand up and say that teenagers or the mentally ill should not receive the death penalty or that undocumented immigrants should be granted legal status. These then become the issues conservatives use to prevent coalitions among people who dislike the right. While it is certainly important for people to see their similarities—the same boat—it is equally important that when some of us are pushed up or down in the hierarchy—another boat—we do not lose our sense of community and solidarity.

Our inability to merge our understanding of the cultural and political, as well as the economic, dimensions of racism and sexism prevents us from creating a

universal standard that includes the most marginalized people. Many proponents of economic justice believe that the key to racial and sexual liberation lies in eradicating or reforming the vagaries of capitalism, that racism and sexism are essentially tools of capitalist profit-mongering, and that controlling capital will remove the incentive for people to be racist or sexist. Unfortunately, hiding differences under an anticapitalist analysis often amounts to universalizing the experience of working-class white men, while leaving all others unorganized, excluded from organization, or subject only to the same tactics that worked to organize white men. In making such an economic analysis, we don't consider the social benefits of racism and sexism, which are available to whites and men who are not of the elite class. Other activists have argued that the lack of democracy unifies all our fights, but we don't all enjoy the same rights under the current definitions of democracy. Civil rights movements have failed to organize the poorest and most disfranchised—welfare recipients, undocumented immigrants, and prisoners, to name a few. Activists have turned to human rights frameworks to mine their potential, but these, too, often obscure the racial, class, and gender differences that plague communities. I am not arguing that we use race and gender as frames to replace these others. Rather I believe that whatever frames we use, we must take into account diverse experiences and the positions in which people find themselves.

Progressives need to define a new universal standard that can handle all these potential divisions—race, class, gender, sexuality, national status, and more. How do we unify all these people? Do they have to have the same experiences in order to make common cause? They do not, but they do have to have the same understanding of what causes experiences to vary so dramatically. Most “universal” ideas obscure the specific ways in which people are attacked and experience that attack; and they obscure the potentially huge tactical strengths that come from each constituency. A clear understanding of how to confront and reform capitalist structures or the institutions of democracy will emerge only from a deep understanding of all power structures and each community they affect, just as a clear effort to eradicate racial discrimination has to include an economic analysis. Increasingly, global society relies on hierarchy by race, class, and gender. If we avoid the specifics of a particular community because it does not fit the universal, we do so at our own peril.

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## What We Need to Do

To summarize, three trends that shape modern life hold major implications for our organizing. The growth of an extreme conservative infrastructure, the globalization of capitalism, and the continued strength of racism and sexism influence



the conditions in which we live and require new strategies for reestablishing progressive values in policymaking. The vast and well-funded conservative infrastructure reduces our ability to rely on governmental institutions for protection against the worst abuses by individuals, corporations, and public agencies; presents us with a nationally connected and intellectually equipped opposition; and drives political debate rightward. The growth of global capitalism undermines the role of local and national governments, privatizes important public functions, bankrupts public agencies, and forces huge growth in migration. The central role of racism and sexism splits the progressive constituency and makes us vulnerable to conservative strategies to drive wedges that expand those splits. To analyze how these trends have affected and continue to affect your community, answer the questions in Exercise 1.1.

While these trends are huge and potentially overwhelming, they can be countered with a sophisticated, long-term strategy based on a commitment to three goals: increasing our organizing among the people affected and then addressing their issues with sustained campaigns and the addition of research and media capacity; framing campaigns on the basis of large-scale ideas and values; and supporting emerging social movements. This section explores the need for these capacities, which are described further in the remaining chapters.

### **Increasing Progressive Organizing**

Not nearly enough progressive organizing is taking place to counter the constituency building and political action of conservatives. While it is very positive that activists are increasingly organizing among youth, ex-prisoners, low-wage workers, and welfare recipients, we don't engage in enough systematic organizing to reveal the large numbers of disaffected people and to counteract the negative media messages hitting politicians and the public about these constituencies. If we are to convince people that their tax money is best spent on improving public education or providing a safety net, we have to be able to produce human evidence of the need for and benefits of such policies. If we are to convince politicians that the general public cares about the decisions they make, we have to be able to generate enough street heat to get their attention. And if we are to make policy proposals that are grounded in reality and would make a difference either in peoples' lives or in the debate, then we have to be in touch with the people who are at the center of such policies.

Three commitments are critical here. First, we have to be willing to systematically expand our base of people who hold progressive values or have specific needs. Everyone who already agrees with us needs to have an organization to join, and everyone who isn't sure needs at least one chance to participate in a group.

Many progressive organizations stop recruiting new members when they get to a certain level of stability; increasingly, groups organize among established activists rather than trying to reach new people because it is simply easier and less stressful. We rely on allies rather than on building the constituency itself.

Second, once people are relating to organizations, we need to be able to address their issues through sustained campaigns, another objective that often stumps activists. The more challenging and nonmainstream our issues are, the more systematic and detailed we have to be in designing our campaigns. While we certainly need to be able to respond to attacks and short-term issues, true social change requires long-term commitment to standing issues.

Third, given the strength of the intellectual resources on the other side, our organizing has to be accompanied by substantial research and media capacity. As people get involved, we all need to have factual as well as moral ammunition for our issues and policies, and we need to be able to articulate those facts to the media. No matter how great we are at organizing truly marginalized communities, they will never be able to make change by themselves. There has to be a larger base of elite and broad public support, and we have to be able to identify and take advantage of the support we already have. Even groups that are able to turn out hundreds of people for a particular action will find sheer turnout inadequate to challenge the reams of research findings emerging from conservative think tanks; that research often runs counter to the experience of the people affected, especially as decision makers become increasingly sophisticated at deflecting criticism and appearing to give us what we want. The media can play a critical role in defining our efforts and in protecting us from the vilifying tactics of the other side. Minimally, every organization should know in detail the institutions it is dealing with, local economic and social trends, and the effects of larger policies, and we should be able to produce at least anecdotal information about our constituencies and issues. Optimally, we should be able to produce or gain access to statistical research and alternative policies. We can begin with modest goals and projects, but we must build more capacity over time.

### **Addressing Core Ideas and Values**

The base building, the development of sustained campaigns, and the research and media work are essentially techniques with no specific moral, economic, or political values attached to them; they are meaningless unless we also address the core ideas that shape society. Any constituency can support regressive as well as progressive ideas, as we see when people of color are recruited into conservative organizations. Just because people share with me a particular experience does not mean that they assign the same meaning to that experience as I do. If there ever was a

time to lie low and not challenge the fundamental ideas of conservatives and capitalists, racists and male supremacists, it has passed. Today, we need to be clear and vocal about what we believe, about the basis on which we oppose economic and social policies, and about the kinds of systemic changes we want. While we will make many tactical decisions about where and how to reveal these ideas to the broader public, internally we need to be absolutely clear and courageous about defining what is progressive and what is not. If we do not, conservatives will continue to characterize our rather commonsense ideas as lunatic, fringy, anti-family, and dangerous.

To be more ideologically ambitious, we have to engage in analysis and political education. We have to read, share information, understand history, bring people to speak to our groups, and talk with people in other places. We have to think about our theories of how society is organized, why it is organized that way, and how change will come. We have to be willing to integrate our experiences with information because no single person can experience everything. Many organizers resist this imperative, hiding behind the notion that a lack of ideological discussion makes their organizations democratic or that attention to larger trends or theory makes organizations elitist. The further you get from peoples' daily experience, organizers have argued, the less likely it is that members will engage.

I can understand taking that position. Many of us and our members have been attacked for our lack of formal education or for not revealing our intelligence in a traditional way. Much of the analytical and theoretical writing we need is in academic and inaccessible language. I, too, have been frustrated by these roadblocks. However, these are obstacles that need to be dealt with; they are not excuses for avoiding a larger analysis. Community organizations and labor unions often have a strong streak of anti-intellectualism, which is both short-sighted and a dangerous mirror of the worst right-wing organizing strategies. The issue of language is also critical here. While it is not necessary to use a complicated word when a simple one will do, it is necessary to be accurate and comprehensive. So, those who have spent much of their life relating to prisons are usually glad to have a phrase like *prison-industrial complex* to describe the reason for their experience. Having to explain what we mean by certain words provides opportunities to engage rather than a reason to run.

### Supporting Large Social Movements

We need to develop a movement orientation to our organizing. While organizations of all sorts produce incremental victories that help to prevent backsliding, shifts in the core values that shape policy take place through social movements that involve large numbers of people. For the most part, community organizations