

# 'Forging a Movement on Shifting Ground'

## :reflections on anti-racism as a catalyst for global justice organizing

by Chris Crass

"It's like coming home", I thought as over 600 people converged at this year's National Organizers Alliance (NOA) Gathering in Sonoma, California. NOA's mission is "To advance progressive organizing for social, economic and environmental justice, and to support, challenge and nurture the people of all ages who do that work." From all over the United States, people organizing in communities, workplaces, campuses and diverse constituencies came together to share experiences, laugh and celebrate and struggle over difficult questions. NOA, which was started in 1992, is multiracial, over half women, multigenerational, family positive (the child-care rocked), and working to be pro-queer.

The theme of this year's biannual gathering was, "Dancing on the Fault Lines: Forging a Movement on Shifting Ground." One of the gathering's goals was to explore the relationships, connections and tensions between local and global organizing, for example, questioning how struggles for community control opposing gentrification can be understood through a global analysis. There was also a focus on how momentum from the anti-globalization protests can strengthen and develop community organizing projects.

In addition to discussion sessions, there were also many examples of work that is actively bringing local/global analysis to the forefront. The National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights debuted their latest documentary "Refugees of the Global Economy", which explores how global economic inequality is directly linked to international migration and how immigrant rights struggles are central to working for global justice.

The main question throughout the gathering was, "What are barriers to forging a movement on shifting ground?" Responses included: "The need to actively engage with race, class and gender politics" and "The need for open dialogue about different styles of organizing and discussion of entirely new ways to organize." For myself the question was "what roles can I, as a white, male, mostly heterosexual, 27 year old organizer play in building the kind of movement I want to be a part of?" There was an overall agreement about the need for anti-racist, multiracial, anti-capitalist, feminist, queer liberationist politics to be at the core of this justice movement which moves from the local to the global while challenging that false dichotomy and developing fresh accompanying analysis. One of the barriers that I heard about repeatedly at NOA is racism and white privilege. There were also discussions on the responsibility of white radicals to engage in anti-racist work with other white folks.

On the first day of the NOA gathering, there was an 'Anti-Racism for Global Justice' workshop and an anti-racist white organizing discussion group. There were also caucuses of Immigrant Community Organizers, Organizers of African Descent, Latino/a Organizers, Asian Pacific Organizers in addition to the Jewish, queer, and youth caucuses. The anti-racist work by white people was guided by the belief that, historically, white supremacy has been a major barrier to

radical movement building. The 'Anti-Racism for Global Justice' workshop by the Challenging White Supremacy Collective looked at white privilege and racism as it relates specifically to the anti-global capitalism organizing of the past two years. White organizers in NOA, including Dara Silverman of United For a Fair Economy, Cheryl Brown of Tennessee Industrial Renewal Network, Kelly Weigel of the Rural Organizing Project, and others took pro-active steps to lead with anti-racism. A group of white organizers from various backgrounds and organizations put together an 'anti-racist white discussion group' to look at how race acts as a barrier to organizing and how white radicals can act as allies to people of color in the struggle to end white supremacy. Anti-racist organizer and mentor to many, Sharon Martinas of the Challenging White Supremacy collective, commented that the anti-racist white discussion group, which she collaborated on, was "like a dream come true".

It was a dream come true because of the many ways in which racism has consistently undermined social movements throughout the history of the United States. The anti-racist work at NOA is aimed at turning racism as a barrier into anti-racism as a catalyst for movement building. This is by no means arguing that anti-racism is the only consideration, barrier, or struggle to face while working for social transformation. Rather, I'm suggesting that the more white people focus on doing anti-racist work, the more space opens up for new possibilities to overcome the other barriers. Similarly, I'm arguing that when men take on anti-sexist struggle, the movement benefits. Additionally, when heterosexuals work to become allies in queer liberation and middle class folks work as allies to working class and poor people, the movement benefits. How does the movement benefit?\* Well, for one, the leadership of women, people of color, working class and poor folks, and queer folks is core to working for collective liberation, and you all have been at the forefront for many years.\*\*

If the ideas and visions leading movements come only from white, middle class, males like myself, then organizing for social change will be limited and narrow. Writer and organizer Chris Dixon adds insight into this dynamic, writing, "And in the same vein, the outcome will be limited and narrow. That is, with ideas and visions chiefly from relatively privileged people, social change may barely touch the lives of the least privileged, at least not in any meaningful way."

Does this mean that folks like me have no place in social movements? No, but it means that folks who are white or male or hetero or middle/upper class or all of the above, need to be critically working to recognize the ways that oppression and privilege operates in their/my life and affects their/my politics.

For instance, in the 1930s, radical worker organizing won the National Labor Relations Act, which formally recognized the rights of workers to form unions. However, a compromise was made and agricultural and domestic workers, who are overwhelmingly people of color, were excluded from the rights granted by the act. Was this Act of 1935 a victory? I would argue that it was. Was it also a significant setback in winning rights for working people and a furthering of racism in the United States? Yes. Were there workers of color and anti-racist white workers fighting to get union recognition for all people? Yes, and they argued that this partial victory would be a way for bosses to continue to pit people against each other and that ultimately it weakened the labor movement in the long run. By nomeans is this an argument

against reforms, but rather a critical look at how reforms impact social movements. Tim Wise, an amazing anti-racist writer and organizer, has said that reforms can act as anesthesia or adrenaline depending on who controls the debate. In the 1930's, hundreds of thousands of workers were organizing with the CIO and militancy was high. By formalizing union recognition through the state and leaving out huge segments of the workforce, the bosses were able to control the debate and divide workers. However, official union recognition could have been used as a spring board to continue organizing workers regardless of what the laws said and thus build working class power.

This brings me back to my central question: What my role, as a white/male/middle class organizer. (I want to emphasize that this is where I'm at in thinking about my personal role. I have way more questions than answers, which is how I think it should be.) My role, as I currently see it, is to act in solidarity with women, queer folks, working class and poor people, people of color to struggle for collective liberation of all of our lives. Does that mean that I think I need to go organize in communities of color? No, but I have much to learn from organizing coming from communities of color. Does this mean we all work together? I think that alliances and relationships that bridge differences are critical, necessary, and potentially revolutionary, but I also think that I need to organize and work with people from my communities (mostly white, mostly middle class). Why?

The more work being done in middle class white communities to challenge white supremacy, patriarchy, heterosexism and capitalism, the more power and space exists for those communities most negatively impacted by these systems of power. Am I saying that white middle class people will then create power for communities of color? No. I'm saying that communities of color have historically generated both resistance and power, but that self-determination has been pushed down and crushed by the state, with the majority of white people either looking the other way, being supportive of the state from the sidelines, actively participating in repression or being completely unaware of what's happening (all of which keep the wheels of white supremacy turning). Working with white people to connect their/my own liberation to anti-racist struggle is key. I want to be accountable to both people of color and to white people.

Do I think that I have answers to these questions of how to make social change and build movements for global justice? No, but being at the National Organizers Alliance gathering, I was reminded of how powerful and satisfying it is to ask these questions, not with the expectation of finding the answers, but to learn through dialogue and exchange of experiences and to experiment with applying knowledge gained through theory, practice and reflection. It is through engaging in theory, practice and reflection that anti-racist analysis is developed.

### **Thoughts on how white privilege impacts organizing for social change**

In thinking about my role and place in organizing for social change, there are many useful concepts and ideas that have helped guide me. Looking at how universalizing white experience can influence activism and lead to the deracialization of issues have been instrumental to developing anti-racist politics and practice.

## Universalizing White Experience

I grew up believing that white people were responsible for all of the good things in life. On television, in the newspapers, in the textbooks at school, everywhere I looked I saw white people occupying positions of respectability and power. There were some exceptions to this: my third grade teacher was African American and the Cosby show brought Black people into my house every Thursday night for many years. There were also many people around me while I was growing up who were not white. I had lots of friends in elementary school who were Latino/a. However, when I studied people who had contributed to society, most likely they were white - from inventors to presidents, from authors and poets to policemen and scientists. I grew up with a mind-set of this being a white society, with some folks of color here and there who were just white people with different colored skin.

What do I mean by that? I mean that I did not learn about other people's cultures, languages, histories. Most significantly, in a white supremacist society, I did not learn about the histories of racial oppression and resistance and how that impacts the reality that we live in. It was as if everyone who lived in the US traced their histories back to the Mayflower.

So I went through life thinking that my experience as a white person was the universal experience of all people. This is an important aspect of internalized superiority: if all people experience reality as white folks do, then if there are disproportionate numbers of people of color living in poverty, then it can only mean that those folks have themselves to blame. Growing up with this mind-set, it became logical to have ideas like, "Mexicans are just lazy", "Black folks are just criminals". The underlying logic of racist social policy was socialized into me without anyone ever speaking a word directly about it.

As I became politically active in high school, my understanding of racism can best be summarized by a T-shirt that I used to wear, "Love sees no color". I didn't see people as Black, Latino/a, Asian American, they were all just people, or so I said to myself, trying hard to pretend that I actually didn't notice what color people were. Now, a colorblind worldview, combined with universalizing white experience, meant that I acted like everyone was just white. I never once thought of it like that, but it is result, not intent that help us understand how power operates. Being white and operating from a colorblind perspective reinforces racism.

How did this manifest? First, I thought of racism only in terms of individual behavior. For example, there was a short-lived gang at my school called PAGAN (people against gays and nig..., quickly changed to nips, when confronted by some Black folks at the school). This was the racism that I saw on campus. I didn't notice that every assigned book that I read in four years of English classes was written by white people. I didn't think about the fact that Latino/as who spoke English as a second language, about one third of the school, were in under-funded programs and ignored on campus (in the newspaper which I worked on and in the annual and school activities).

The first real challenges to my understanding of racism came from friends of mine who were folks of color. My friend Daniel was Latino, but I didn't think of him like that, which was the problem.

He busted out one day and talked about how he had spent his entire life trying to fit in. He talked about elementary school and how his white friends would say, "we don't think of you as Mexican" or "you're not like those Mexicans, you're one of us". He told me about how hard he tried to be "one of us" and how much shame and guilt he felt for being Mexican. Another friend of mine, Lucy, who is Iranian, told me about the experience her family had when they first moved to the United States. It was during the Iran Hostage Crisis and they were living in a mostly white suburb. A brick was thrown through their window along with a scream of "go home". The only Black family in the neighborhood opened their home up to provide safety for her family. The act may have been individual, but the popular image of Arab/Middle Easterner as terrorist and criminal is social.

The major challenge to my universalizing of white experience, to my unconscious thought that everyone experienced reality as I did, came from my friend Jonathan. I met him at a party at his house. Our first conversation revolved around a poster on his wall, which I had been staring at for a long time. The poster was of twelve important leaders in the Black community. I could recognize two of them, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X (I knew very little about either of them). Jonathan came over and I asked him who these people were. He threw out names - Harriet Tubman, Marcus Garvey, Martin Delany, Frederick Douglas, W.E.B. DuBois, Mary McLeod Bethune, Sojourner Truth. I had no idea what he was talking about, but I was fascinated and wanted to memorize their names. Jonathan, my first friend who's Black, and I quickly became close.

A few months later the Rodney King verdict was announced and shortly thereafter Los Angeles was on fire. I had just finished reading W.E.B. Du Bois's "The Souls of Black Folk" that morning (the first book by a person of color that I had ever knowingly read). I was full of rage and sadness when I heard the verdict. I wanted to join the protest at the Parker Center Police Station in LA. I couldn't fully articulate why I was enraged, my mind was spinning with so many thoughts and images. That night a group of friends gathered together at my house and we talked. Jonathan started schooling us white kids. He said that he needed us to understand what it was like for him. He told us about the time that he was on his way to school, which was mostly white. He was walking onto campus, when he was stopped by the police. He was searched and they made him prove that he went to the school. I was beginning to make the connections, from the police thinking him suspect to my lack of knowledge about African American history to the rage in LA after the verdict. I knew almost nothing about Black history, yet my mind was inundated by images of Black criminals from the media. My mind was split between "but, Jonathan, you're not like other Black people, you're one of us" and serious confusion. I went with serious confusion and decided that it wasn't about memorizing names of Black leaders on that poster, but rather, it was about understanding the movements and the histories in which they played important roles.

Jonathan gave me Langston Hughes's book, "Simple's Uncle Sam," shortly after the explosion of rage in LA. In the inscription he wrote a quote from Martin Luther King, Jr.: "If you can't fly, run. If you can't run, walk. If you can't walk, crawl. But by all means, keep moving." I had to learn these histories myself. It was not Jonathan's role to educate me about all that it means to be Black; it was my responsibility to seek knowledge. I want to be clear about what this means. It is

not the responsibility of people of color to educate white people. If and when folks of color school white people it should be on terms set by people of color (and all the while, white people must always remember that people of color did not set the terms of white supremacy). Ultimately white folks need to take up the work as their/my own, as if their/my liberation depended on it - cuz it does.

## **Deracialization**

Universalizing white experience plays a significant role in how white activism operates. It impacts how strategies are developed, goals are set, tactics decided upon, and the way issues are talked about. The first time that I heard this concept was during a workshop lead by organizers of Critical Resistance East. Critical Resistance was a conference held in the Bay Area in 1998. Over 3000 people came together to critically examine, discuss and take action against the prison industrial complex (PIC). The PIC includes the prisons, the criminal justice system, the police, the legal system and how laws are created. The PIC also involves racial profiling and the enormous impact incarceration has on low-income communities, particularly communities of color. Out of the conference in '98 working groups were formed to organize against the prison industrial complex. From there a similar conference was organized on the East Coast. There is currently organizing underway for a Critical Resistance South conference.

At this workshop about the upcoming Critical Resistance East conference, the term deracialization was used in relationship to anti-prison organizing. The concept is certainly not limited to fighting the PIC; it's just that some of the most path-breaking anti-racist work amongst white folks is being done by white, mostly queer, anti-prison activists. With that said, deracialization impacts every issue that I can think of.

The prison system in the United States is enormous. The US locks up more people than any other country on the planet. While there has been important work around these issues for decades, prison activism has grown dramatically since the first Critical Resistance (CR) conference. Which brings us back to this term, deracialization: to de-racialize an issue, to look at a situation without an analysis of race and racism. The workshop that I was at was about the upcoming CR East conference and it was being presented to a mostly white audience. The organizers of the CR East conference talked about the recent influx of white activists into anti-prison work. They said that while it was good that more white people were organizing around prison issues, it was also cause for concern. The concern being that if white people start working on prison issues, the issues could be de-racialized. For example, white activists might organize around the ways that corporate power is benefitting from prisons and how prison labor is being exploited by corporations. Certainly these are important aspects of the PIC, but corporate power is only part of the story. It is critical to analyze prisons in historical context; the modern prison system grew significantly after the Civil War. While the Emancipation Proclamation sanctioned the ending of slavery in Southern states loyal to the confederacy, it was actually African slaves themselves who ended the chattel slavery system. The largest general strike in United States history took place as hundreds of thousands of former slaves abandoned the plantations. Furthermore, African soldiers in the Union army marched through the states excluded from the Emancipation Proclamation and brought liberation with them. This was the beginning of Reconstruction, a period of time in which

Black folks were not only on the move but taking hold of power in society (see Vincent Harding's *There is a River: the Black Struggle for Freedom in America*). The growing prison system, backed up by what became known as Jim Crow laws, were directly intended to contain and undermine the Black freedom struggle. It is not coincidence that the 15th amendment ends slavery, except as punishment for a crime.

Thus the prison system and the criminal justice system have played key roles in maintaining not only capitalism, but also the racial oppression that capitalism was built upon in the United States. This was not just the case in the South, but throughout the country. What this history shows is that it is a misnomer to say that racism exists in the prison system or the criminal justice system; rather they were both developed to maintain white supremacy and capitalism.

In short, talking about prisons means talking about racism. The concern about white activists coming in is that the communities most impacted by the prison system will no longer be the ones framing the issues and putting race front and center. This is compounded by the fact that media is more likely to cover an action by white groups than one organized by groups lead by people of color. The solution is not for white activists and organizers to stop working on prison issues, but rather for white activists to show respect for organizing in communities of color around these issues. Respect is a word that means many things, but in this context it means looking at the organizing already happening, listening to how the issues are being talked about and learning what the strategies are. It isn't about uncritically accepting what someone says because they're a person of color and it isn't about, if you are white folk, not developing one's own analysis. It's about engaging in a struggle that is coming from and being lead by people of color and respecting that by listening, learning, and getting involved. White folks certainly need to develop their own leadership in talking about and organizing around these issues, particularly talking with other white folks.

Challenging deracialization doesn't mean throwing in the word racism wherever possible, but rather having an understanding of how racism shapes the issue so that it shapes the way you talk about it. For example, if I only talk about the privatization of prisons as the issue, then it would sound like I just want the state to continue running prisons. But if I talk about privatization in the context of corporations getting rich off of a prison system that disproportionately locks up youth of color while the education system crumbles, then it's a different picture. How issues are talked about also impacts the ways that allies in that struggle are seen or not seen. If I focus exclusively on privatization and corporations - what other groups come to mind who fight around these issues? If you think about privatization, corporations, education, public schools, youth, racial justice and social inequality - what groups come to mind? There are many other aspects of white privilege and its impact on social change organizing, but universalizing white experience and deracialization are concepts that I've been trying to understand for a while. Each represents both the barriers to movement building, and also the ways that anti-racism can act as a catalyst for building the anti-racist, multiracial, feminist, queer liberationist, and anti-capitalist movements that we need to create radical social change.

As the National Organizers Alliance gathering was titled, we are "Dancing on the Fault lines: forging a movement on shifting ground." As I engage in these questions about working for social

change and my role, I am comforted knowing that I am part of a movement for collective liberation. As radical educator Paulo Freire says, "We make the road by walking".

### **Movement building through Mad Props**

Part of building movements for social justice is recognizing the amazing work going on around us and giving it the respect that it deserves.

National Organizers Alliance. [www.noacentral.org](http://www.noacentral.org).

National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights. [www.nnirr.org](http://www.nnirr.org).  
310 8th St. Suite 307 Oakland, California. Write to get a copy of their new documentary on globalization and immigration and get information about BRIDGE (Building a Race and Immigration Dialogue in the Global Era)

Critical Resistance. [www.criticalresistance.org](http://www.criticalresistance.org)  
Find out more about organizing against the prison industrial complex. You can also send a message to Critical Resistance East and thank the organizers for putting out awesome anti-racist analysis like the concept 'deracialization'.

People's Institute. [WWW.THEPEOPLESINSTITUTE.ORG](http://WWW.THEPEOPLESINSTITUTE.ORG)  
PI have been doing anti-racism and community organizing workshops for over 20 years. They are located in New Orleans and have branches in Minnesota and Oakland. The People's Institute is a multiracial training group and they do workshops across the country.

The following organizations are mostly or entirely white.

United For a Fair Economy. [www.ufenet.org](http://www.ufenet.org).  
UFE has been doing excellent popular economics workshops and trainings all across the country to develop economic literacy so we can fight global capitalism. Contact them about workshops in your area. They are located in Boston, Massachusetts.

Call to Action. [www.calltoaction.org](http://www.calltoaction.org).  
CTA is a group of activists who travel across the country working with campus and community groups. They do workshops on anti-racism, consensus decision making, media skills and direct action. Contact them about workshops in your area. They are located in Prescott, Arizona.

Tools for Change. [www.toolsforchange.org](http://www.toolsforchange.org).  
Margo Adair and William Aal have been doing anti-racism, anti-oppression trainings all over the country. They work with individual organizations and also do work on alliance building and internal transformation of organizations. They are located in Seattle, Washington.

Challenging White Supremacy WORKSHOPS. [WWW.CWSWORKSHOP.ORG](http://WWW.CWSWORKSHOP.ORG)  
CWS is a group of anti-racist organizers and trainers doing workshops in San Francisco and around the country.



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\*Throughout this essay I ask questions and respond to them. These are mostly questions that I ask myself and/or that white radicals have asked me.

\*\* I have been experimenting with the use of words like "you, we, us, their, ours, my" in relationship to who is included and excluded when these words are used. The audience that I envision writing to in these essays is the mostly white, progressive/radical, student/youth/working hard for little pay, organizer/activists of the broader movements for justice in the United States and Canada. It is not that this essay is intended for those audiences only, but that those are the people with whom I work with and organize with. Thinking about these issues of language and inclusion/exclusion comes from critique of my comrade, Nisha Anand.

Collective Liberation on My Mind is a recently released 64p. collection of essays by Chris Crass and is available by writing to [info@kersplebedeb.com](mailto:info@kersplebedeb.com).