

Some Characteristics of Anti-Racism

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There have been numerous times in recent years when I have become aware of the different ways in which people think about what it means to be "anti-racist". The ways in which "anti-racism" is described necessarily stem from one's view of racism, and since my view is one which is clearly not adopted by many people, I have often found myself in disagreement with what many call "anti-racism". The issue has come to my consciousness in specific ways.

Several times in the past couple of years, I have had requests from people who want me to send them a list of organizations which I would call "anti-racist". When that first request came I knew immediately that I was going to be in trouble because I would not want to include on my list a lot of organizations which clearly see themselves as "anti-racist". The same kind of difficulty comes when I am asked to suggest whether or not **individuals** are anti-racist in the way they live. To help clarify my own views I have started to list some of what I look for when determining what characterizes anti-racism, in either an individual or an institution. What I share here is a beginning of that process.

Probably what I look for most of all when I define anti-racism is some **form of sustained action the intent of which is to change a system or an institutional policy, practice, or procedure which has racist effects**. For me this is a **primary criteria** for defining what constitutes anti-racism; it is also the criteria which separates me from many others. It is born out of a conviction that racism is both deeply institutionalized and widely enculturated in the systems of our national life. Unless the presence of racism **in those forms** is addressed at some level, there is not anti-racism. A person may be engaged in building authentic relationships with individuals of different races, may be consistent in educating people about prejudice, may be stalwart in resistance to discriminatory actions, but without action to bring about some systemic change, may not be fulfilling the needs of anti-racism. I will applaud and assist in the efforts to create authentic relationships, in the education against prejudice, and in the stance against discrimination. All of those things must be done by the anti-racist person. The **other thing which is the most difficult for many people, and is frequently untouched: there is too often the failure to see or the lack of willingness to change the racism which is built into systems**. It is there that the prejudice, the inauthentic personal relationships, and the discrimination finds its support. Unless those support systems are changed, the full task of anti-racism is not addressed.

At Community Change, we do work to help educate people about how prejudice functions in their lives and relationships; we do stand wherever we can against discrimination, and will always do so, circumscribed only by our limited resources. We do also identify systemic issues which in some way we can probe with an intention to bring about change. Because of our conviction that we must work on that level **also** in our anti-racism, we, for instance, cooperate with others in gathering data to be used in a national effort to eliminate government involvement in the harassment of black elected officials. That is an issue reaching beyond prejudiced attitudes, though certainly prejudice is involved, going beyond poor interracial relations, even beyond discriminatory acts, though both

are involved, but encompassing institutional commitments to a racist status quo in which power is held by some and denied to others. Anyone familiar with the history of government agencies will understand how those institutional commitments often function to support racism.

I emphasize the importance of addressing the **institutional issues**, because I find white friends in particular frequently do not do so. It is necessary for the **anti-racist** who works in housing to be aware of how policies which appear quite harmless may in practice have racist effects, as, for instance, a restriction on numbers of children. As a stated preference that may sound all right, but if it is discovered that such a policy will limit housing opportunities for a racial group which statistically has larger families than others, the anti-racist will become active to change that policy. Similarly, a person may be an administrator in a college with a stated commitment to "diversity". The college may sponsor multicultural events, underwrite support services for students of color, and revise curricula to include a spectrum of perspectives, but may still have a policy which limits the listing of certain courses in a catalog. If those courses, are, for instance, in Black Studies, student accessibility to them is made difficult. The result clearly may be racist. The **anti-racist** administrator will document that effect, and move for a **policy** change.

Action which focuses **only** on individual relationships, on attitudes, even simply on discriminatory behaviors, will seldom address the institutional and systemic nature of racism. **For those of us who want to be anti-racist it is imperative that we address this larger level at which racism functions.**

Another dynamic I look for in anti-racism is **the extent to which a person or an organization is involved in multi-racial efforts to combat racism.** This becomes more complex as the demography of our population assumes greater racial variety. I become daily more aware of the continued ways in which Native peoples, the "original" oppressed of our hemisphere, continue to experience oppression. I see a rapidly expanding presence of Asian peoples from vast areas of ocean and continents, greeted by xenophobia and racial hatred. I see people whose primary language is Spanish, from a spectrum of nations and cultures, greeted by racial and linguistic prejudice. I daily see African American concerns of three hundred years still not addressed. I see anti-Semitism rooted in centuries of stupid stereotypes. As I witness the complexity of intra and inter-group relationships, it becomes clear that we must work in every way possible to unite all these groups with progressive whites in coalitions to create a new and more just common life. This is hard work, requiring a combination of patience, action, clarity of vision, eagerness to listen, willingness to risk new roles and relationships, and sheer determination to persevere in the face of harsh reality.

I also look for a clear focus on racism, always in the context of a larger picture. The picture analogy is helpful to me; I think of a huge canvass which depicts all the forms of racism and other oppressions. That is an immense canvass which circles the earth. The patterns which various oppressions take, the dynamics which characterize them, and often the people victimized by them have much in common. **All** these forms of oppression need to be resisted, **all** need to be diminished, **all** need attention, **BUT** no one person, no single organization can give attention to **all** forms of oppression. Somewhere I learned

that power comes from **focussed** energy. So, I need to **focus** my attention, to **focus** my resources, to **focus** my energy in order to maximize any power I have. I have to choose some place to **focus**, while at the same time keeping the whole picture in my eye. So I look at the canvass, and say this is where I will **focus** my attention ... **for me, and for Community Change that focus is on racism ... but we must never forget that racism is part of a web of interconnected forces, all of which we must resist. Keep the whole in mind but focus on a place where you can gain enough knowledge, enough power to have some effect.** Sounds like a version of "think globaly, act locally"! The anti-racist needs to nurture an awareness of the interconnectedness of all oppressions, yet for the purposes of gaining effectiveness needs a clear **focus for action.**

Tomorrow I'll probably want to add to this beginning, or maybe to start all over! Let's keep the discussion going.

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