



TEN YEARS' TIME

COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

**Masterclass supplementary:**

# **Philanthropy, Anti-Oppression & Collective Liberation**

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# Philanthropy, Anti-Oppression and Collective Liberation

“It is (we are) colonialism in the empire's newest clothes.  
It is (we are) racism in institutional form.

Philanthropy moves at a glacial pace. Epidemics and storms hit, communities go under water literally and metaphorically, Black and brown children get shot dead or lose their youth inside jail cells, families are separated across continents, women are abused and beaten and raped, all of Rome burns while we fiddle with another survey on strategies, another study on impact.”

Edgar Villanueva, 2021

## Philanthropy and Power

While the philanthropic sector undoubtedly expends resources which support change at an individual and collective level, the sector itself is part of a broader institutional framework which holds the very systems of power in place that we say we want to transform. For example, charitable foundations, by their very design, have governance, leadership and grant-making structures which mirror the broader oppressive structures in society. Often, the “capital’ is/has been sourced through exploitation of human beings and our planet. White, patriarchal leadership is centred and normalised, the status quo is robustly defended and justified, and small/momentary benevolent tweaks to the system are celebrated as progress. Rather than being in service to equity, social justice and collective liberation, institutional philanthropy is largely in service to itself and to its deeply ingrained world views.

Yet the work of the philanthropic sector could be entirely different.

One of the first things I learned from my early work in women’s refuges, was the importance of committing to dismantling the system that makes services such as refuges and rape crisis centres necessary in the first place. As well as working with individual survivors, I also needed to work towards ending violence against women, therefore ending the need for my job to exist. Such is the labour of collective liberation i.e. attending to current realities, while simultaneously being in service to alternative futures. It is deep, moment-by-moment work, which requires that we challenge our own sense of self-importance and our investment in maintaining the status quo.

- Philanthropic organisations could choose to ground themselves in a commitment to ending the need for a philanthropic sector. They could become sites of courageous, meaningful, anti-oppressive and liberatory work in ways that shake the foundations of institutionalised benevolence.


## Conceptual Scaffolding

- In order to develop an anti-oppressive practice, we must engage with oppression itself. This is reflective work that scrutinises society, history, our institutions and communities, and ourselves as individuals. Oppression is not an abstract phenomenon. Across our societies, we are in positions where we are active in, complicit in, benefitting from, or being harmed by (and within) systems of power.

## Oppression

We can think about oppression in a number of ways including:


- Oppression works by ascribing or denying benefits (rights, advantages, privileges, protection, as well as social, economic and political power) based on various “categories”. This enables groups and individuals to have, and maintain, value and power over other groups and individuals.
- Oppression operates through structures that create and work to maintain social hierarchies of social ‘identities’ and ‘categories’ (which can be real or constructed). These include age, ‘race’, ethnicity, disability, class, caste, faith / spiritual belief, sex, gender, sexuality, citizenship and other areas
- Oppression impacts, and operates throughout, all areas of our human ecosystem, and manifests through thoughts (prejudices/pre-judgements), ideas (stereotypes), behaviours / actions (discrimination, exploitation etc.) and systems (laws, customs, traditions, education, political structures etc.).




We sometimes relate to oppression as a kind of equality/diversity tick box or relay. For example we can think of racism as separate and distinct from ableism, or from sexism. However, the 'isms' are all deeply interconnected. One framework which allows us to name and scrutinise these interconnections is intersectionality. Intersectionality is a concept which emerged within Black feminist theory and is rooted in Black women's lived experience, analysis and social justice strategies. The term was first used by African American legal scholar, Kimberlé Crenshaw. Intersectionality can be employed as:

- An invitation to think about the ways that oppressions interact with each other, e.g the way that racism intersects with sexism, ableism, heteronormativity, class injustice / classism and casteism; and the impact that this has on individuals and groups of people.
- A way to consider how individuals and groups may be subject to intersecting oppressions e.g. sexism and ableism, while also benefiting from other social protections on the basis of factors such as race e.g. through whiteness. This is important if we are to disrupt and dismantle systems of power

Intersectionality is one of the frameworks that we can use to explore inequitable power relations across our societies, and to reimagine resistance including through collaboration and coalition. Intersectionality invites us to disrupt the ways in which, even in our organising strategies, we reinforce systemic power. For example, why do we assume that we can move closer to climate justice, without centering the leadership, wisdom, experiences and strategies of those that are most acutely marginalised by climate injustice? Why does our analysis of the dynamics of class injustice in the UK, so often presume that working classness equals white working class communities? Why do we assume that gender justice is a possibility if we are building strategies that centre white, middle-class, non-disabled, heterosexual, cis women?





Our work needs to be able to hold complexity and contradiction, in ways that are rooted in the material realities of those that we are too often willing to let die.

To do this, it is important that we act, as opposed to just thinking about it! For the philanthropic sector to do the real work of transformation, we need to be willing to enter into, and sustain practices that contribute to creating the freedoms we say we believe in.


## Practice


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Creating anti-oppressive pathways and structures, requires change across the philanthropic space. We need to become skilled at holding complexity and contradiction. Power itself needs to be upended. While there are no easy blueprints, we can learn from folks that are already practising alternatives. This is important, as thinking about the scale of change that is needed, can lead us into a “this is so big, what difference can I make?” lament. However, as we have learned from progressive social movements, it is important that we start somewhere.

Organisationally, it can help to take a moment to ask ourselves some difficult questions (examples are at the end of this document). This is not an invitation for more self-indulgence! This is an invitation to do the work.

Honest answers to these questions should reveal points of tension and sites of potential change. Those are the places we should attend to. This might mean whole new governance models and different trustees. It might mean complete organisational redesign where some people leave their seats of power. It might mean plans to ‘spend-down’, and/or new investment strategies. In some cases it might mean the reparative work of moving large parts of the endowment to racial justice movements and organisations. It might mean humbly partnering with folk who are deep in the work






Disrupting the status quo is messy, uncomfortable work that requires good facilitation, grounded leadership and a stomach for change. It requires a willingness to stay with the contradictions that come with any social justice efforts.

## Reflection

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Rather than treating philanthropic organisations as “listed buildings” that we are trying to preserve, and where we can make only slight adjustments, we could reposition these same entities as ‘living organisms’. If we are to be part of ending oppression and creating the conditions for our collective liberation, what needs to be nurtured, shed or pruned? Can we adopt a posture which allows us to hold the eventual need to die and be composted in order for new life to emerge? What kind of Ancestors do we want to be?



## Practice Sheet

### Organisational Reflective Questions

- Where does this money come from (originally)?
- Where is our money invested?
- Who controls this money? Who holds institutional power?
- Who do we share money with? How?
- Who do we not share money with? Why?
- What does it cost the people we share money with, to receive money from us?
- Who do we trust and distrust? How does that show up in our practice?
- How do we hide behind notions such as “*risk*”, “*charitability*”, “*investing so we have more to share*”, “*good governance*” in order to avoid sharing and shifting power?
- Who are we really accountable to? What does that mean for how we do our work?
- What does “in perpetuity” mean, in the context of a polycrisis? Why are we hoarding wealth?
- Are we willing to change, or are we here in service to our version of benevolence?
- If we are willing to change, what is the individual and collective labour we need to do as a philanthropic sector, to contribute to a world where we are no longer needed?

### Individual reflective questions

- What is my sphere of influence? Is my voice valued? Do I have decision-making authority? Can I influence decisions? What kind of scale of influence can I acknowledge?
- Where do I hold power?
- Where do I have limited power/influence? Can this be changed?
- Who do I need to connect with?
- Who am I accountable to? Who do I think I should be accountable to?

## Resources

- [“The Urgency of Intersectionality”](#) a Ted Talk by Kimberlé Crenshaw
- [“What’s Intersectionality”](#) by Arica Coleman. Kimberlé Crenshaw and Lady Phyll [Talk Intersectionality, Solidarity, and Self-Care](#)
- The intersection of being Disabled and a person of Colour - [videos](#) by Sisters of Frida
- This [video](#) from Newcastle University is not perfect but uses a systems approach to intersectionality.
- Reflections on the marginalisation that Black women in the UK are subjected to: by Lisa Amanda Palmer [“Diane Abbott, Misogynoir and the Politics of Black British Feminism’s Anticolonial Imperatives: ‘In Britain Too, It’s as If We Don’t Exist.’”](#) Sociological Review, (December 2019) and Dhrodia, Azmina. “We tracked 25,688 abusive tweets sent to women MPs – half were directed at Diane Abbott.” New Statesman, (September 5, 2017). <https://www.newstatesman.com/2017/09/we-tracked-25688-abusive-tweets-sent-women-mps-half-were-directed-diane-abbott>
- [Mobilising Money](#) by Healing Justice London a panel discussion between Marai Larasi, Derek Bardowell, Stephanie Brobbey and Vanessa Thomas chaired by Dr Rebekah Delsol (2023)
- [Post Capitalist Philanthropy Webinar 1: From Paradox to Possibility](#). Alnoor Ladha & Lynn Murphy (2023)
- [Paraphilanthropy: Giving Money its Freedom Papers](#). Bayo Akomolafe (March 2024)
- Decolonizing wealth: indigenous wisdom to heal divides and restore balance by Edgar Villanueva (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2021).
- Giving Back: How to Do Good, Better by Derek A Bardowell (Hachette

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