



## *Privilege and Solidarity*

CHALLENGING CAPITALISM,  
CHALLENGING PHILANTHROPY

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[www.millionsforreparations.com](http://www.millionsforreparations.com): Good information about reparations.

[www.cwsworkshop.org](http://www.cwsworkshop.org): Challenging White Supremacy. Tons of really good articles about privilege and anti-oppression work.

[www.classactionnet.org](http://www.classactionnet.org): Challenging classism.

[www.faireconomy.org](http://www.faireconomy.org): United for a Fair Economy “raises awareness that concentrated wealth and power undermine the economy, corrupt democracy, deepen the racial divide, and tear communities apart.”

[www.poormagazine.org](http://www.poormagazine.org): POOR Magazine’s awesome website. Lots of good articles.

[www.racialwealthdivide.org](http://www.racialwealthdivide.org): More about the racial wealth gap.

## **Hello.**

I wrote this zine for a few reasons. When I was growing up, I knew my family had money but I didn’t really get the concept of “privilege.” Then I became an activist and started thinking about systems of power and oppression and how privilege played a role in them. I started thinking about my own privilege, mostly as a white person, and about how I could challenge the racist systems that gave me privilege while others were oppressed. Then I started thinking about class privilege, and about how I was raised with a lot of it, and about what that meant. Somewhere in the midst of that, I learned that I had a \$400,000 trust fund and became incredibly self-conscious about it. Then I realized, mostly through the urging of smart friends and fellow activists, that it was useless (and counter-productive) to try to hide or otherwise not deal with my class privilege, and I started thinking about how I could take responsibility for it in ways that reflected my values as an activist.

I began talking to other people about class privilege, and about the ways that having it or not having it affects our lives. In 2005 I went to a conference called Making Money Make Change – a gathering of young people with class privilege to talk and strategize about “leveraging” privilege for social change. I left that first MMMC feeling both inspired and critical, but excited enough that I volunteered to join the organizing committee. Organizing MMMC served as my entry into the world “donor organizing,” and I started thinking a lot about how social justice work is funded, how funding can co-opt or damage movements, and how people with access to more financial resources than we need can use those resources to support radical movement work led by people in oppressed communities. Donor organizing can mean different things. It can mean moving wealthy people to give money to social justice organizing rather than traditional forms of philanthropy. It can mean working in established and informal networks of rich people to direct energy, resources, and

influence to support the goals of movement work. To me, donor organizing especially means working with other class-privileged folks to challenge oppression, capitalism, and economic injustice.

When I volunteered to help organize MMMC for the second year in a row, I decided to simultaneously embark on a self-education project. I wanted to learn more about my own financial situation, like the details of my trust fund and the history of where it came from. I wanted to learn more about how my family came to be wealthy (a new thing for my parents, who both grew up working-class). I wanted to learn about the political and economic processes that create wealth disparity and economic injustice. I wanted to learn about the landscape of “social change philanthropy” and of philanthropy in general – a world that was unfamiliar to me when I first arrived at MMMC, but which I soon learned is totally connected to both the existence of economic injustice and some attempts to remedy it. I wanted to develop strategies for leveraging privilege. I wanted to connect my work with other class-privileged folks to my other activism and to a greater social justice movement. And I wanted to figure out how to give away my trust fund in a way that reflected my values and supported social justice work.

So I read a ton of books. I talked to a million different people about movement building, privilege, activism, class, and every related topic. I had lots of conversations with my dad about his and my class history and financial resources, and about how we fit into a bigger picture. I looked at my trust documents and started learning about how the money was held, who controlled it, and how to give it away. I pushed myself to work hard on organizing MMMC and to challenge the aspects of it I was critical of. I got involved in more projects that pushed me to start conversations in my communities about money and class. I started trying to leverage my own privilege by raising funds for social justice organizing from people I know.

**Teresa Odendahl, *Charity Begins at Home: Generosity and Self-Interest Among the Philanthropic Elite*, Basic Books, 1990:** Another book in the genre of “sociologist studies rich people in philanthropy.” Reading this made me hate philanthropy, but in the best way.

**Allan G. Johnson, *Privilege, Power, and Difference*, McGraw-Hill, 2006:** A very clear, simple, concise explanation of the ways privilege and power function. Especially useful for conversations with your family.

**Paulo Friere, *Pedagogy of Hope*, Continuum, 2006:** Paulo Freire was a class-privileged educator and theorist who used radical education to challenge oppression. This book, published 20 years after his seminal *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, is kind of a reflection on his life and work. He has lots of interesting things to say about privilege, class, and liberation if you can handle the dense, rambling theory.

## Web Resources

<http://www2.tidesfoundation.org/mmmc/>: I criticize because I care; I have Making Money Make Change to thank for getting me started thinking about this stuff, pushing me to be a better organizer, and providing a forum to meet and learn from other folks who are thinking about what it means for class-privileged people to be an effective part of social justice movements.

[www.resourcegeneration.org](http://www.resourcegeneration.org): Resource Generation works with young people with class privilege who are trying to figure all this stuff out. They are good.

[www.boldergiving.org](http://www.boldergiving.org): Profiles people who gave away significant portions of their assets.

**Anne Slepian & Christopher Mogil, with Peter Woodrow, *We Gave Away a Fortune: Stories of People Who Have Devoted Themselves and Their Wealth to Peace, Justice, and a Healthy Environment*, New Society Publishers, 1992:** Good book profiling wealthy people who gave away lots of money, plus analysis about economics, privilege, guilt, and other important things for rich people to think about. The folks in this book go way further in their giving than most people in philanthropy; but I think the book also illustrates how much further we have to go.

**Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2006:** A really good book about the subtle, insidious racism typical of the post Civil Rights era, and the rhetoric and ideology that holds it up. Helpful in thinking about the ways that privilege can make our own racism (or, by extension, classism, sexism, etc.) invisible to us. Bonilla-Silva interviews a bunch of mostly white people about race, transcribes portions of the interviews verbatim (with the verbal tics and rhetorical incoherence of casual speech intact), and then rips them apart using critical analysis.

**Susan Ostrander, *Money for Change: Social Movement Philanthropy at Haymarket People's Fund*, Temple University Press, 1995:** If you are obsessively researching social change philanthropy like me (and maybe even if you aren't), you might find this book incredibly interesting.

**Ira Silver, "Buying an Activist Identity: Reproducing Class Through Social Movement Philanthropy," *Sociological Perspectives*, 1998:** If you don't have access to those article databases that only students and academic types are allowed to use, feel free to email me and I'll send you a copy of this.

This is one of the results of that self-education project. It's the product of my own perspective as a white queer person with inherited wealth. I made this zine because I wanted to challenge myself to articulate some of my thinking by writing it down. And I wanted to challenge other class-privileged folks to think about this stuff too, or think about it more, and to keep thinking about it and keep pushing ourselves to be more accountable, honest, and critical.

I also wrote this as a way to explain to friends and fellow activists outside of this donor-organizing/challenging-class-privilege/social-justice-funding world what the hell I'm doing, and to connect this work to other forms of organizing. The whole point of working to challenge wealth and power in class-privileged communities is to support a greater social justice movement. We need to be having these conversations in all the work we do, not just in insular circles of lefty rich people.

Every thought in this zine was developed and processed through conversations with genius people like Laura, Rogue, Anna, Elspeth, Kriti, Sam, Chad, Holmes, Karen, Vanessa, Tanya, my dad (David), my mom (Annie), Killer, Jamie, Socket, Drew Christopher, and many others. I hope to continue to have as many amazing, inspiring, lengthy conversations in the future.

Please write to me and tell me what you think.

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## Money Stories

“Storytelling often represents the most ideological moments; when we tell stories we tell them as if there was *only one way* of telling them, as the ‘of course’ way of understanding what is happening in the world. These are moments when we are ‘least aware that [we] are using a particular framework, and that if [we] used another framework the things we are talking about would have different meaning.’”

-Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists*<sup>1</sup>

When I was growing up, I never thought of my family as rich. Even when I became involved in donor organizing work, I resisted identifying my background as owning class – I knew I had class privilege, but I thought of myself as “upper-middle class” for a long time. After doing some probing about my family’s wealth and doing plenty of reading about class in the U.S., I finally realized that this perception of my family’s class status had more to do with dominant ideology around wealth and my own resistance to identifying as “really” rich than with actual reality.

The more I’ve learned about wealth and class privilege, the more I see my incorrect interpretation of my own class status as symptomatic of a bigger problem. An important first step in taking responsibility for class privilege is to begin looking at our personal stories as part of a larger system. Or actually, multiple intersecting systems that work together: systems of institutionalized oppression like racism and patriarchy, the economic system of capitalism, and systems of ideology that keep all the other systems in place.

I’ve anti-capitalist politics since before I became involved in donor organizing and began to look closely at my

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<sup>1</sup> From *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States* by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, p. 75

**Karen Pittelman and Resource Generation, Illustrated by Molly Hein, *Classified: How To Stop Hiding Your Privilege and Use it For Social Change*, Soft Skull Press, 2005:** Funny, incisive, and good. And the illustrations rule.

**bell hooks, *Where We Stand: Class Matters*, Routledge, 2000:** bell hooks being brilliant about class. Also has a few chapters that specifically address wealth and challenge wealthy people to be more transparent/generous/honest/conscious.

**Tiny, a.k.a. Lisa Gray-Garcia, *Criminal of Poverty: Growing Up Homeless in America*, City Lights, 2006:** Tiny is a founder of POOR magazine, a media project in the bay area dedicated to advancing the voices of poor and otherwise marginalized people. This memoir is about how Tiny and her mother Dee came to be homeless and poor, the experiences they had trying to become *not* homeless and poor (using extremely creative and artistic means), and a great and accessible critique of how the system is set up to keep people homeless and poor.

**Linda Stout, *Bridging the Class Divide and Other Lessons for Grassroots Organizing*, Beacon Press, 1999:** Linda Stout founded the Piedmont Peace Project, a community organization, led by poor and working-class people, with a really awesome class analysis. She writes about how social movements have failed to create real, large-scale change in this country because they have failed to unify folks from different class backgrounds. She describes ways that middle- and upper- class people consciously and unconsciously exclude, silence and oppress lower-income people within social movement organizing.

**Paul Kivel, *You Call This a Democracy? Who Benefits, Who Pays, and Who Really Decides*, Apex Press, 2004:** Doesn’t beat around the bush in calling out the ruling class. Also lots of useful diagrams.

but to also challenge the systems that create wealth inequality in the first place. I want to find more ways of giving that shift funding decisions into the hands of a community rather than keep the decisions in the hands of individual wealthy donors. I want to continually challenge myself to leverage my own privilege in donor networks and funding institutions while also challenging the power and dominance of foundations and the 501(c)3. I want to be part of a critical dialogue about money, about need vs. luxury, and about security vs. hoarding. I want to keep these conversations going and resist the temptation to settle into privilege without challenging it. I want to push myself to go further, go deeper, and do the work I need to do to be an effective activist and organizer. I want us to push each other.

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## Bibliography

**INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, *The Revolution Will Not be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex*, South End Press, 2007:** This book should be required reading for anyone involved in funding, anyone involved in social justice organizing, and anyone, ever.

**Meizhu Lui, Barbara Robles, Betsey Leondar-Wright, Rose Brewer, and Rebecca Adamson, with United for a Fair Economy, *The Color of Wealth: The Story Behind the U.S. Racial Wealth Divide*, The New Press, 2006:** Incredibly useful for understanding connections between racism and economic injustice. The five different authors give examples (backed up with lots of facts, history, citations, and analysis) of ways that institutionalized racism and (especially) explicitly racist government policy prevented and continue to prevent people of color from accumulating wealth and assets while helping and supporting wealth-building for white people.

own class position. The work, energy, and conversation happening in U.S. activist movements around the time of the 1999 WTO protests in Seattle radicalized me about the globalization of neoliberal, corporate, US-led, imperial capitalism. Later I got involved in labor organizing and started thinking more about the history of capitalism in the U.S., and all the ways our economic system has supported and perpetrated various forms of oppression. When I finally did start to examine my personal privilege, I began trying to figure out where I, as a person with inherited wealth, fit into my anti-capitalist analysis.

In the process of thinking about this, I called my dad to ask him some specific questions about our class status as a family and his interpretation of it. I'm trying to create an ongoing dialogue between my dad and me about class and privilege, and part of it focuses on learning more about how, as a first-generation owning-class individual (he grew up upwardly-mobile working class), my dad came to accumulate wealth and power. He's always had a very simplistic story about how he "made it," basically centering on a combination of luck and hard work. Around the time I was born, he started a company that produced some kind of software publishing product; the company ended up taking off and the stock value skyrocketed; hence, new owning-class status for my family.

I respect my dad a lot; he's thoughtful and kind, and doesn't at all fit stereotypes of greedy corporate CEOs. The point isn't to dis my dad and call him out as being oppressive, but to look at our position as wealthy people within a greater structure of capitalism and oppression. If we don't step back and challenge the broader framework that we're situated in, it's easy to play a complicit role in oppressive systems; that's how privilege works. Sociologist Allan Johnson describes this as the "path of least resistance." He writes: "Good people with good intentions make systems happen in ways that produce all kinds of injustice and suffering for people in culturally devalued and excluded groups...If we participate in systems the trouble [of oppression] comes out of, and if those systems exist only though

our participation, than this is enough to involve us in the trouble itself.”<sup>2</sup>

My dad’s story of wealth accumulation – the way he tells it – is straightforward, honest, and true to his experience. It also could have been ripped verbatim from the pages of the Resource Generation book *Classified* (check out the bibliography in the back of this zine); specifically the chapter on money stories, which describes some of the myths and archetypes that go into creating ruling-class ideology. Karen Pittelman, the author of *Classified*, writes,

...the majority of the money stories begin to take on a strange similarity to each other. They focus on one person, often a man, and they center on how his hard work, intelligence, ingenuity, willingness to take risks and temerity lead to eventual financial good fortune. While the details of each story vary, the same plotlines – even the same phrases – occur again and again: “pulled himself up by the bootstraps,” “wise investor,” “rags to riches,” “worked day and night,” “never took a handout,” and “self-made man.”<sup>3</sup>

My dad’s story is a lot like this. It can be hard to talk about the oppression that is linked to wealth accumulation for him *personally*, because of course he doesn’t see himself as an oppressor. He’s a liberal. He sees his wealth as having been acquired basically in a vacuum, without negatively affecting others in any way. He spent his work life in offices and board meetings, not cracking the whip in a factory or overseeing the plantation. He isn’t making policy decisions and he doesn’t support the Bush administration. He isn’t an active participant in outsourcing jobs overseas, privatizing public services, breaking up unions, deregulating trade laws, exploiting immigrants, or

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<sup>2</sup> From *Privilege, Power, and Difference* by Allan G. Johnson, p.86-87

<sup>3</sup> *Classified*, p.67

But meanwhile let’s talk about what we can do, as individual wealthy folks who care about in social justice, to model the values we believe in. Capitalism means that anyone who has inordinate wealth has it at the expense of people who are poor. Holding on to more money than we need puts us in a position of wielding power in unjust ways. Let’s keep doing the deep, hard personal work of processing how wealth has affected our lives, let’s keep leveraging our influence in the world of philanthropy; but let’s do it with an acknowledgement that in a just world, no individual would be in the position of controlling exorbitant wealth.



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## The End...

Thinking about this stuff so much has left me with a lot more questions than answers. I want to keep figuring out how to work with other class-privileged people to not only move money,



it's impossible to give away experiences gained by the privilege of having wealth. But often we have a choice about whether or not to hold on to our *actual money*.

I'd like to talk more about what it really means, as wealthy people, to "align our resources with our values" when our values are about economic justice. What does it mean to talk about wealth redistribution if we aren't taking the steps to equitably redistribute our own wealth? How do we justify making the conscious choice to *stay rich* when that position puts us in the role of wielding influence and class power whether we intend to or not? Are we really challenging inequality and class supremacy when we continue to inhabit the role of "funders?" What does it mean to never give away our principal, or only give a little of it? What does it mean to pass that wealth down to our children?

The thing about class privilege is that it skews your perspective. My dad is always trying to convince me that our family isn't as wealthy as I think we are, and that if I met some of the people he knows who are *really* rich, I would see how modest our lifestyle has been in comparison. Class privilege often means we don't see the bigger picture – that we compare ourselves to the miniscule portion of the population who are even richer than we are, instead of to the vast majority of people on the planet who are prevented by oppressive systems (racism, capitalism, colonialism...) from being able to meet even their basic needs. This takes the pressure off of us to really examine our place in these systems as people with (often multiple forms of) privilege.

Ultimately, wealth redistribution won't happen by rich people suddenly deciding to voluntarily give away all our money. An important way to leverage privilege is to use the power bestowed on us by our class position to advocate for *involuntary* wealth redistribution, and to support anti-poverty organizing and organizing that challenges the systemic oppression that creates wealth inequality.

most of the other obvious methods by which power is concentrated in the hands of a few.

But his ability to accumulate wealth was influenced by more than just his hard work and blind luck – although both of these played a part. As an entrepreneurial white man, he was well positioned to benefit from capitalism, white supremacy, and patriarchy. He was able to make business connections, leverage influence, wield power in the worlds of business and technology, and be taken seriously to an extent that wouldn't likely be available to a man of color or to any woman, thirty years ago or today.

In the book *You Call This a Democracy?*, Paul Kivel gives a good analysis of how wealthy people in the U.S. benefit from and support oppressive systems, even when we don't directly make the decisions that create and enforce them. He draws a distinction between the owning class (which he defines as the wealthiest 20% of the population) and the "power elite" – a much smaller group within the owning class who are leaders in business, politics, philanthropy, and culture, and who are directly involved in high levels of society-shaping decision making. Though most rich people aren't members of the power elite, we benefit in various ways from their decisions. Even if we have leftist politics and a scathing critique of neoliberalism, colonialism, global corporate takeover, militarism, and the rest of the U.S. power elite's evil agenda, if we are in a position to benefit from the systems that support this agenda (like capitalism, white supremacy, and patriarchy) we are implicated in it. It's very easy for wealthy people to maintain an individualistic perspective on our lives when the realities of most people in the world are invisible to us. So we end up with stories like those that *Classified* describes – ideological narratives that keep the focus off the owning class and shield us from blame or responsibility for oppression.

It's important to note the way these stories play out not just in our own lives as people with wealth, but in the greater society. As members of a dominant class, wealthy people hold systemic power – which allows us to frame everything from our perspective. This framing takes place not just on a personal level, but in all upper-class-controlled institutions (media, government, philanthropy, etc.). Classist ideology teams up with other forms of oppressive ideology and creeps into nearly all of the institutions that exert power over our lives. Reagan's racist characterization of poor Black women as "welfare queens" created the climate for deeply harmful welfare "reform." Invisibility of poor people (except as criminals) in media and popular culture erases the realities of the majority of U.S. citizens and encourages a blame-the-victim mentality that helps corporations and the government get away with deeply oppressive policies and practices. Philanthropic rhetoric that deems rich people to be the ones best equipped to fund social services allows for increasing erosion of the federal safety net. The myth that racism is over takes the responsibility off the government and private institutions (corporations, universities, foundations) to respond to the movement for reparations.

I think it's crucial to draw connections – between media storytelling and the stories we tell in our families; between the racism of politicians and legislators and the insidious, institutionalized racism that affects us without our even realizing it; between the paternalism of philanthropy and the privilege that we as individuals unconsciously enact; between the oppression by obvious perpetrators like police, military, and sweatshop-owning, union-busting multinational corporations and the oppression underlying our personal family fortunes.

Anti-capitalist social justice movements continually inspire me to challenge myself as a rich person and to challenge other rich people, because they situate us as players in systems that deeply harm the majority of people on the planet. It's crucial to me to incorporate a radical critique of capitalism into both my

be donors, but really challenging power doesn't feel good. It's been coming up in the context of MMMC, where the goals of the retreat are somewhat in dispute: Is our aim to simply move money to social justice organizing, even if in doing so we risk perpetuating oppressive class power dynamics? Or is the goal for us to do real anti-oppression work that asks us to examine and challenge our privilege in a deeper way – even if we risk losing some people who aren't interested in doing this deeper work but might otherwise have given money?

### Letting Go

Obviously, I have a biased position; as a class-privileged person, I want to challenge my fellow class-privileged people to confront our privilege and support social justice movements however we can. I'm not a fundraiser at an organization that relies on the contributions of wealthy donors – if I were I might have a different perspective. But since I have the luxury of reflecting on idyllic scenarios in which wealthy people step up and use our privilege to challenge capitalism and the ruling class (and since I'm trying to figure out how to do that myself), I spend a lot of time thinking about what that would look like.

The donors described in *Money for Change* talked about a tension that they referred to as "living the contradiction;" meaning, being rich and also being committed to social change. This is an important tension to talk about, but it kind of glosses over the fact that having exorbitant wealth is *usually voluntary*.<sup>12</sup> Divesting oneself of class privilege is often impossible depending on the circumstances – if you grew up with money like I did, it's sure to have affected every aspect of your life, and

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<sup>12</sup> Not always. There are plenty of wealthy people who don't have control over their assets for various reasons (like the money is stored in a trust controlled by uncooperative trustees), or who will continue to inherit money on a regular basis for an extended period of time, or whose relationships with family would become so strained or damaged by the act of giving away their money that it becomes a big factor in giving. Obviously it's not always simple.

Crossroads Fund, whose model has community activists and wealthy donors making funding decisions together. The logic behind this has to do with integrating donors more deeply into social movement work by putting them in working relationships with community organizers, which seems like a worthy goal; but the article is about the ways that relationships between the donors and the activists on the board end up reproducing class power dynamics.

A vastly oversimplified nutshell version of Ira Silver's findings: a) wealthy donors care about social movements, want to identify as activists, and want to be down; b) they look to the community organizers on the board to validate their activist identities and assure them that they are down; c) community organizers are committed to moving money and don't want to alienate donors who are a major source of funding. They therefore yield to the unspoken pressure to reassure the donors that they are, in fact, down; and d) donors, secure in the belief that their participation on the grantmaking board is sufficient evidence that they are down, continue about their business as rich people reassured that there is no need for them to deeply challenge their class position or greater economic inequality. Ira Silver sums it up better: "[In] order to ensure that they get their small piece of the pie, community organizers willfully legitimate the class hierarchy that creates the very need for philanthropy in the first place."<sup>11</sup>

So to relate this discussion back to the question about why we give and what we get in return: We get to feel like we are down. We get to feel less guilty about having wealth. We get to feel like we are good. We might end up feeling like giving some money gets us off the hook of really challenging our position of power and privilege in society.

This is the tension that I feel so often in donor organizing: we want donors to feel good so that they continue to

understanding of my own wealth and privilege and into the donor organizing work I do. The "progressive philanthropy" world tends to take a stance that resists truly challenging capitalism and oppression in order to accommodate more moderate wealthy donors. Much of the landscape of social change philanthropy seems designed to make rich people feel better about ourselves and to channel *some* funds to progressive (or even radical) organizing without actually challenging the roots of inequality.

You don't have to look hard to find clear explanations of how capitalism is inextricably linked to multiple oppressions: racism, through (for example) slavery, imperialist acquisition of land and raw materials, and dividing white and POC workers to keep them from organizing; sexism, through exploiting the labor of women (who are already culturally devalued) and relying on women's unpaid and unrecognized labor; ableism, through laws allowing companies to hire people with disabilities at less than minimum wages; and so on.

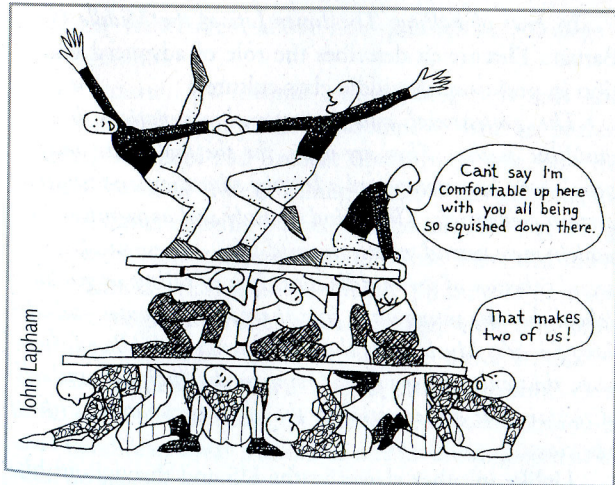
We should talk about these things when we talk about having class privilege, because as the beneficiaries of capitalism we are implicated whether we like it or not. For white folks with class privilege, the history that gets erased when we tell our simplistic "pulled-himself-up-by-his-bootstraps" money stories is the (continuing) history of explicit and institutionalized racism in the U.S. Some of us can trace our inherited wealth to slavery or other systems in which white people directly profited off of the stolen labor or land of people of color. Even for those of us with "new" money, previous generations of our families are more than likely to have benefited from racist policies and institutions that helped white people and discriminated against people of color (Homestead Act, G.I. Bill, land grants, New Deal, loans, jobs, contracts, unions...). Throughout U.S. history, people of color have been explicitly prohibited by racist government policy from building assets; and since the most important indicator of wealth is how much money your parents

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<sup>11</sup> From "Buying an Activist Identity: Reproducing Class Through Social Movement Philanthropy" by Ira Silver, in *Sociological Perspectives* p. 316

had, cultural myths about a “level playing field” start to look pretty empty.

For class-privileged people to be allies in social justice movements, we have to take responsibility for the bigger picture behind our own wealth. Our personal decisions about money and the stories we tell (to ourselves and others) have reflections and repercussions connected to our place in the larger class system. Challenging these decisions and narratives, and challenging ourselves to look deeper, is a good way to start shifting our participation in oppressive systems.



Although the Haymarket staff might directly solicit participants at some point after the conference, during the conference their role was to hold a space for the personal development of wealthy conference attendees – and to build relationships with folks who might later become major donors to Haymarket. This required the staff to do a lot of emotional labor and sociability work; Ostrander writes: “Building and maintaining these relations seemed time consuming, sometimes rewarding, and sometimes emotionally draining. A large portion of the work seemed to consist of informal ‘schmoozing’ and caretaking and what looked like, but really wasn’t, relaxed ‘hanging out.’”<sup>10</sup>

It seems a little disingenuous to attempt to build authentic cross-class relationships when funding is directly at stake. But there are tons of models in social change philanthropy that have community activists and wealthy donors working together, either to directly make funding decisions or to build a progressive donor community that will presumably eventually lead to increased funding for social change organizations: cross-class donor circles; grantmaking boards within community foundations; the Haymarket wealth conferences of yore (i.e. the 90s); and MMMC, their contemporary counterpart. While it’s safe to say that these models are a major improvement on traditional philanthropy, I think it’s important to think about how power is exercised, outwardly or covertly, in these situations in ways that mimic and enforce dominant power structures. For wealthy people, I think it is our responsibility to interrogate our role in these dynamics, and think about the ways that we resist redistributing power and resist removing the (obvious or subtle) strings attached to our money.

There’s a great article by Ira Silver called “Buying an Activist Identity” that further elaborates on the dynamic I’m getting at, although in a different context. In the article, Silver describes the grantmaking board at the Chicago-based

<sup>10</sup> Ostrander, p. 85

effective.”<sup>9</sup> Somehow, the groups they deemed most “effective” strongly tended to be white and middle-class.

### **Taking Responsibility**

In yet another totally awesome and useful book – *Money for Change: Social Movement Philanthropy at Haymarket People’s Fund* – author Susan Ostrander writes about internal processes at Haymarket, a community foundation whose grantmaking model (at least at the time this book was published) was especially strict in terms of not allowing participation of its wealthy donors on the grantmaking board. One of the ways that Haymarket raised money, despite its limitations on donor control, was by holding “wealth conferences” for progressive rich people.

It was kind of fascinating for me to read about these conferences, because a lot of the dynamics that came up within them were so similar to issues that I think about around MMMC. Haymarket’s wealth conferences served as a major fundraising tool, even though there was an explicit policy disallowing direct solicitation of participants. MMMC has a similar non-solicitation policy, but also succeeds (to varying degrees) in moving its wealthy attendees to give money. I think that the success of these types of “passive fundraising” brings up some important questions about why we give (i.e., what is our incentive), and what we ask for in return.

Susan Ostrander describes the Haymarket conferences as spaces that focused heavily on personal-growth work and relationship building. Haymarket staff played a role in the conferences, but not to champion Haymarket or to necessarily present a case for its model of grantmaking. In fact, Ostrander indicates at one point that many of the conference participants didn’t even really know exactly what Haymarket *was*, even though they may have been Haymarket donors.

## **Accountability and our Feelings**

“I feel really scared when a working-class person challenges me, but I feel fine if another wealthy person does.”

-Donor at the Haymarket People’s Fund<sup>4</sup>

In the process of organizing Making Money Make Change, I’ve been thinking a lot about the concept of accountability – specifically, what it means to strategize about supporting social justice work when we are doing it in a space of mostly rich people, and how emotions that rich people have around money and privilege play a role in preventing us from being accountable. “Accountability” is kind of a clichéd and overused word, but I think it’s a crucial concept in any situation in which privileged people are doing social justice work. If we aren’t held accountable to a larger movement and to people who experience the forms of oppression that our privilege shields us from, we aren’t really challenging systems of inequality.

There are lots of examples in social movement history of times when women, people of color, poor people, queer people, immigrants, disabled people, and other communities directly targeted by injustice have challenged fellow activists to confront internal oppression that exists within our movements. Activists with various forms of privilege – even if we have the best intentions – have a marked tendency to overlook the impact of institutionalized oppression in our own lives and in our organizing. Although it’s our responsibility to challenge oppression in our own communities, our work is not accountable to anyone if it is always done behind closed doors.

I’ve noticed that sometimes when progressive wealthy people come together to talk about various personal and political issues related to having wealth, there can be a tendency to throw around language about safety and “safe space.” We talk about safe space at MMMC and in other donor organizing/social

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<sup>9</sup> Odendahl, p. 176-177

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<sup>4</sup> From *Money for Change* by Susan Ostrander, p. 153

change philanthropy type spaces where most or all of the people present are wealthy. We want to feel safe because there are so many taboos around speaking openly about class and money, and it's often really hard/scary/vulnerable to share these things with other people. When I first came to MMMC, I felt super guilty about my class background and pretty much terrified of my trust fund. Processing the emotions behind my fear and connecting with other class-privileged people who were deeply engaged in challenging privilege and doing economic justice work was inspiring, and helped push me out of guilt-and-shame mode (and the accompanying political paralysis).

I think that these types of spaces – where privileged folks come together to learn from and push each other, and do the deep emotional work that comes with challenging our own privilege – are important and crucial. But I think they're also dangerous. When we gather together in a group of rich people, even if our goal is to talk about social justice, we risk perpetuating class privilege because it is so ingrained in us. We want to create a space of support and challenge, so that we can do our own work to become better allies and activists. We *don't* want create insular networks/spaces/communities of progressive or radical rich people with no accountability to a larger movement. But I think that the boundary between these two scenarios is a fine line that we sometimes, often unintentionally, cross.

The concept of “safety” in these types of spaces has a lot of problematic implications. Outside of this context, I mostly think of “safe space” as a way for people who directly deal with a specific type of oppression to create a temporary space in which that form of oppression is alleviated as much as possible (i.e. space for queer people, space for survivors, space for people of color, etc.). I think it's also possible to conceptualize “safe space” as an intentional space where everyone present has consented on a specific set of agreements about respect, listening, confidentiality, etc. But in progressive donor circles, I think an implication underlying the concept of “safe space” is

movements – but unless we consciously and intentionally try *not to*, we may end up enacting these dynamics anyway. It's a function of the way privilege works that systemic oppression usually manifests not through conspiracy, but as a natural reproduction of power and privilege.

Here's an example: in the early years of the San Francisco-based Vanguard Foundation, grantmaking was done by two boards, one made up of (wealthy, white) donors and one made up of members drawn from the (activist, mostly people of color) “community.” Both had access to equal amounts of money, and would make grants separately. In a quote I found in Teresa Odendahl's book *Charity Begins at Home*, a Vanguard donor board member explains:

The donor board would fund certain kinds of issues that perhaps were mainly organizations of white people – maybe more middle-class white people – doing certain, what we would consider essential work. The community board would sometimes fund the project of a community that might not be the most incisive, but nonetheless the community had been underrepresented in our funding.

A glaring problem in this statement – and one that I think is representative of a way larger problem – is the assumption by the donor board that the organizations doing the most “incisive” work are white middle-class organizations. Later, Odendahl indicates further what seems to be a prevailing belief of the wealthy donors – that the community board funded projects because of a desire to “see that the constituencies they represented were funded,” while donors, free from the obligation to fulfill such quotas, possessed a purer motivation to simply reflect “their politics and their sense of which groups were

people. Grassroots movements have historically been funded by people in the communities doing the organizing, and the donor/activist dichotomy can be thought of partially as a reflection of the increasing influence of foundations and the non-profit industrial complex on social movements. That said, I think it can be useful to use this dichotomy when talking about foundations and philanthropy, because it's so ingrained in those institutions. But take it with a grain of salt.]

I think looking at these different types of funding boards sheds some light on how deeply we don't want to give up power. Community foundations that strictly limit donor involvement in funding decisions have a much harder time attracting wealthy contributors. And within the broader world of social justice philanthropy, activist-led re-granting institutions are just a small part of the way that wealthy people give money. Instead, we're starting our own foundations, participating in elite donor networks with other lefty rich people, creating our own projects or nonprofits, or just giving directly to organizations doing work that we find interesting.

What are the costs when rich people are the ones making the decisions about how to fund social movements? At its most insidious, this funding dynamic can take the form of elite individuals and foundations using money as a way of manipulating movements and steering them away from forms of organizing that pose a true threat to elite power. This dynamic is elaborated on in many of the phenomenal essays in the book *The Revolution Will Not be Funded*, listed in the bibliography. A good example is the way that the Ford Foundation used funding to exert its influence in the Black power movement, supporting a focus of Black capitalism over Black liberation and directing movement energy away from radical organizing.<sup>8</sup>

Of course, as individual progressive donors, we don't always set out to harm, co-opt, control, or de-radicalize

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<sup>8</sup> This is talked about more in *Black Awakening in Capitalist America* by Robert L. Allen, which is excerpted in *The Revolution Will Not be Funded*.

that it is a space in which rich people can talk about the specific experience of having class privilege without the fear of being heard or challenged by people with whom that privilege is not shared.

I think it's a misuse of the concept of safety to use the term "safe space" to describe a space that is designed for people with privilege, no matter what the purpose. We live in an unjust society that creates innumerable circumstances in which safety (in various forms) is available to privileged people at the expense of people who are oppressed. Using "safety" to justify or describe spaces that exclude people who lack a certain type of privilege not only implies that people who aren't as privileged as we are somehow make us "unsafe," it ignores the reality of power dynamics and the meaning of safety in the general world. As members of a dominant class, we feel "safe" within oppressive structures. Institutionalized oppression is *designed* to make us feel safe.

So then, what do we do with the intense emotions that arise when we talk about our own privilege? We certainly have a right to our feelings; and when we take steps to understand the roles we play in institutionalized oppression and begin to confront our own internalized supremacy, the level of emotion is bound to be high. Also, the experience of growing up with wealth and privilege can come with a whole host of connected issues related to family, self-worth, intimacy, community, and so on. This stuff is deep, and it is inevitable that when we delve into it we encounter anger, tears, frustration, and other forms of intense emotion.

I think it is both possible and necessary to work through our feelings in a way that is intentionally anti-oppressive. Our feelings are contextual – they don't arise in a vacuum, and we don't express them in a vacuum. If, for example, we experience fear, shame, or anger as a response to being challenged (personally or politically) by folks who aren't wealthy, we can respond to that by both acknowledging the validity of our emotions, and interrogating the emotions for the hidden meaning

behind them; how they might be connected to classism, how they might scare us out of challenging our privilege.

The reason for having caucus spaces around privilege should not be because we are afraid of being open with or confronted by people who don't share our privileged experiences. It's important for wealthy people (or white people, men, or whoever) to support and challenge each other to fight oppression, to dive into the emotion and pathos specific to the experience of having class privilege, and to do some general working-out of our shit. Non-wealthy people don't always have to be present for this – most would probably prefer not to be.

But if we are attempting to truly support social justice, wealthy people can't remain the only participants in the conversation. When we create exclusive caucus spaces, we should be thinking about how to also create spaces for broader community conversation. When we give ourselves the space to cry/vent/rant about our privilege among a group of similarly privileged people, we should also be challenging ourselves to move towards increasing transparency in our personal lives and communities about our lives and our class backgrounds.

Doing our personal work is necessary for anyone in social justice movements – but we should be careful not to over-focus on the personal at the expense of a bigger critique. It can be easy to get sucked into dissecting our own privilege and the way that it affects all our life experiences, but doing this work is minimally useful if we don't bring it into more public, institutional arenas. If the goal of the work becomes personal growth, we risk losing the broader analysis – and with it, the possibility of challenging the roots of oppression within and outside of our privileged communities. In an essay called “The Filth on Philanthropy: Progressive Philanthropy's Agenda to Misdirect Social Justice Movements”, writers Tiffany Lethabo King and Ewuare Osayande describe Women With Money (WWM), a support group in Philadelphia for women with financial wealth:

There are lots of (well, at least a few) community-based foundations throughout the country with the goal of funding social justice organizing. One thing that's been really interesting for me to learn about is the different ways that these foundations distribute money; i.e., how they set up their grantmaking boards. I think that looking at these grantmaking boards gets at the roots of some of my questions about how the *ways* that we give money can support or challenge class power dynamics.

The simplest model of shifting power within these types of foundations is to place grantmaking decisions in the hands of a board that is made up of activists and community organizers, with the majority coming from the communities that are most affected by oppression and inequality (people of color, women, queers, poor and working-class people, etc.). The idea is that these are the folks best equipped to disperse funds to social justice organizing – not only are they affected by issues of injustice in a more direct way than elite funders, but they're experienced activists with expertise and grounding in grantee communities.

That's a simplistic explanation, and of course there are a million ways that things can get complicated. But what's been interesting to me in learning about these types of foundations is how rarely that model is actually implemented. More often some compromise is struck that allows for greater donor control: the grantmaking board is made up of a combination of donors and activists; or there are *two* grantmaking boards – one for activists and one for donors, dividing up the funds and making grants independently; or the board is made up only of donors, with an expressed commitment to funding social justice work.

[I want to note that drawing a stark distinction between “donors” and “activists” is weird and problematic, and often used in ways that are counterproductive to movement-building. Obviously, donors can and should be activists, and activists can and should be donors. I think it hurts our movements to imply that “donors” have no role to play in the actual, on-the-ground organizing work, and to characterize “donors” only as wealthy



people using various forms of monetary giving to maintain and hoard power, class status, and wealth. The culture of traditional philanthropy provides its own motivations for giving – membership in elite networks; influence over politics, media, and culture; participation in upper-class institutions; and so on. Since our goal as progressive donors is to challenge this dynamic, I think it’s useful to take a close look at what inspires and motivates us to give.

The concept of “incentive” comes up a lot in fundraising and philanthropy. Incentive to give money takes many forms in different situations, from tax deductions to public recognition to a feeling of satisfaction and self-worth. But I think that often, “incentive” can be translated to mean “power and control.” In *Charity Begins at Home*, a businessman with inherited wealth told the author: “Entrepreneurs have a great need to control. If you give them a controlling reason to give philanthropic money, you have all of the sudden got a philanthropist that might not otherwise be there.”<sup>7</sup>

### **Shifting Power**

Philanthropy is such a horrifying institution that I feel dubious about attempts to reform it into something that is capable of supporting radical social movements. At the same time, we live in a capitalist society in which foundations play an increasingly influential role. Wealthy people, depending on our situations, have varying levels of involvement and influence in the world of philanthropy. For wealthy people with radical politics, it’s important to have a critique of these institutions whether we choose to work within them or not. It’s been useful to me to learn more about philanthropy (both “traditional” and “alternative”), because it helps me to understand the forces at play in any work that wealthy people do to “leverage” privilege for social change.

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<sup>7</sup> Odendahl, p. 36

According to their website, WWM “creates a welcoming, stimulating environment where women who have wealth, whether earned or inherited, can gain new perspectives on their lives and their money.” The group also provides “a place to explore issues of wealth with safety and confidentiality.” A wealthy person talking confidentially with other wealthy people about her money does not put her in a position of accountability to people who are not wealthy. Rather, it simply makes them comfortable about having more money than they know what to do with. Some of the issues explored by WWM include guilt management, accountability, personal relationships [and] political giving...The primary function seems to be to help (by and large, white) women deal with the guilt of having money and how to manage it (not give it up). Although they claim to discuss accountability, the question that begs to be asked is: accountability to whom? Nowhere on the site is there any acknowledgement or articulated participation of people of color or the poor. Within this controlled set-up, accountability exists only between white people with money and the white Left social justice groups that want access to it. This further substantiates our claim that by not openly demanding wealth redistribution, reparations, or justice for exploited workers, white social justice non-profits function as brokers for the wealthy. They simply help them manage their money and assuage their guilt for having wealth accrued from the stolen and exploited labor of people of color.<sup>5</sup>

I want to acknowledge that dealing with/challenging privilege is nuanced and complex, but I also want to talk about

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<sup>5</sup> From *The Revolution Will Not be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex* edited by INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, p. 82

how exclusive spaces created so that we can feel comfortable as wealthy people don't push us in the direction of accountability. I think it's important, in doing this work, that we *don't* feel comfortable – discomfort is the inevitable result of challenging class power and money taboos and the lies we are told (and tell) about wealth and the economy.



## Philanthropy vs. Wealth Redistribution

“These rich young people do not give their wealth away; it is not redistributed. They give away their income and keep their capital. And, as embarrassed as it might make them feel, they symbolically carry this capital – and privilege – with them in all their endeavors. As donors they do not fully relinquish their power, although they try to share it. Sometimes they resent the fact that they are not more appreciated, that their opinions are sometimes discounted. It is difficult for them to escape the attitude of noblesse oblige with which they have grown up.”

-Teresa Odendahl, *Charity Begins at Home*<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> From *Charity Begins at Home: Generosity and Self-Interest Among the Philanthropic Elite* by Teresa Odendahl, p. 185

That quote comes from a book about the practices, motivation, and ideology of elite philanthropy. Specifically, it is from a chapter about “alternative” or “social change” philanthropy. Although social change philanthropy seeks to change the power dynamics endemic to traditional philanthropy, Teresa Odendahl’s observations point out the importance of continuing to challenge philanthropy in all its forms.

The practice that we in the U.S. refer to as philanthropy is almost always a tool for the ruling class to maintain itself. Foundations, the most common vehicle of philanthropy, were created by the wealthy elite as a way to shield their fortunes from taxation. The great majority of philanthropic giving goes to elitist institutions that largely serve and benefit the rich – private universities, ballet, opera, museums, etc. Even when philanthropic money goes to institutions that serve marginalized communities, it is within a paternalistic framework of “charity” – providing basic services without challenging the roots of inequality.

There are lots of great books that critically analyze traditional philanthropy – some of them are listed in the back of this zine. But most people in the leftist donor movement are already critical of traditional philanthropy – that’s why we’re creating new forms of giving that challenge injustice and support grassroots community organizing.

But the more I learn about/observe/participate in the world of social change philanthropy, the more I feel really dissatisfied with where we’re at. I’ve been thinking about how social change philanthropy is subject to many of the same oppressive symptoms as traditional philanthropy. Ostensibly, an aim of social change philanthropy is to redistribute not only money, but also the decision-making power that determines how the money is used. But I think that as progressive donors, we often fall short of redistributing both money and power.

A simple question that I think is important to ask in trying to understand all of this is: Why do we give? The history of philanthropy in the U.S. is a history of wealthy, ruling class