

Ten Things to Remember: Anti-Racist Strategies for White Student Radicals

by Chris Dixon

After many years as a white student radical (in high school and then college), I'm reconsidering my experience. I made a lot of mistakes and was blind in many ways, particularly as a white person. What follows are some lessons that I am learning, some strategies for reflecting on, interrogating, and disrupting racism in our lives.

1. Transforming the world means challenging and changing institutions and ourselves. Systems of oppression are ingrained in both and, accordingly, must be confronted in both. More than once an activist of color or an actively anti-racist white person has confronted me: "Why are you always rushing off to do solidarity actions with people in other parts of the world when you don't even make time to deal with your own shit?" They're right. As white student activists, we are in fact notorious for protesting injustices across the globe, yet neglecting to confront systems of oppression on our campuses, in our communities, and in ourselves. Being an effective student activist means making priorities, and at times we must prioritize slower-paced, not-so-flashy work over dramatic actions that offer immediate gratification. Being an effective white student activist means prioritizing daily dismantlement of white privilege--creating and participating in forums for whites to grapple with racism, allying with struggles that people of color are engaged in, constantly remaining open to our own mistakes and feedback from others.

2. Predominantly white activist organizations are built within society as it is and, as a result, are plagued by racism and other forms of oppression. We can minimize or deny this reality ("we're all radicals here, not racists") or we can work to confront it head-on. Confronting it requires not only openly challenging the dynamics of privilege in our groups, but also creating structures and forums for addressing oppression. For instance, two experienced activists I know often point out that, sadly, Kinko's has a better sexual harassment policy than most activist groups. Workers are accountable for their actions and victims have some means of redress. With all of our imaginative alternatives to capitalist and hierarchical social arrangements, I have no doubt that we can construct even more egalitarian and comprehensive ways of dealing with sexism, racism, and other oppressive forces in our organizations. And we must start now.

3. We absolutely should not be "getting" people of color to join "our" organizations. This is not just superficial; it's tokenistic, insulting, and counterproductive. Yet this is the band-aid that white activists are often quick to apply when accused of racist organizing. Mobilizing for the WTO protests, for example, I had one white organizer reassure me that we didn't need to concern ourselves with racism, but with "better outreach." In his view, the dynamics, priorities, leadership, and organizing style, among other important features of our group, were obviously beyond critical scrutiny. But they shouldn't be. We must always look at our organizations and ourselves first. Whose voices are heard? Whose priorities are adopted? Whose knowledge is valued? The answers to these questions define a group more than how comprehensive its outreach is. Consequently, instead of looking to "recruit" in order to simply increase diversity, we, as white activists, need to turn inward, working to make truly anti-racist, anti-oppressive organizations.

4. We have much to learn from the leadership of activists of color. As student organizers Amanda Klonsky and Daraka Larimore-Hall write, "Only through accepting the leadership of those who experience racism in their daily lives, can white students identify their role in building an anti-racist movement." Following the lead of people of color is also one active step toward toppling conventional racial hierarchies; and it challenges us, as white folks (particularly men), to step back from aggressively directing everything with an overwhelming sense of entitlement. Too often white students covet and grasp leadership positions in large campus activist groups and coalitions. As in every other sector of our society, myths of "merit" cloak these racial dynamics, but in reality existing student leaders aren't necessarily the "best" leaders; rather, they're frequently people who have enjoyed lifelong access to leadership skills and positions--largely white, middle-class men. We need to strengthen the practice of following the lead of activists of color. We'll be rewarded with, among other things, good training working as authentic allies rather than patronizing "friends"; for being an ally means giving assistance when and as asked.

5. As white activists, we need to shut up and listen to people of color, especially when they offer criticism. We have to override initial defensive impulses and keep our mouths tightly shut, except perhaps to ask clarifying questions. No matter how well-intentioned and conscientious we are, notice how much space we (specifically white men) occupy with our daily, self-important jabber. Notice how we assume that we're entitled to it. When people of color intervene in that space to offer something, particularly something about how we can be better activists and better people, that is a very special gift. Indeed, we need to recognize such moments for what they are: precious opportunities for us to become more effective anti-racists. Remember to graciously listen and apply lessons learned.

6. White guilt always gets in the way. Anarcha-feminist Carol Ehrlich explains, "Guilt leads to inaction. Only action, to re-invent the everyday and make it something else, will change social relations." In other words, guilt doesn't help anyone, and it frequently just inspires navel-gazing. The people who experience the brunt of white supremacy could care less whether we, as white activists, feel guilty. Guilt doesn't change police brutality and occupation, nor does it alter a history of colonialism, genocide, and slavery. No, what we really have to offer is our daily commitment and actions to resist racism. And action isn't just protesting. It includes any number of ways that we challenge the world and ourselves. Pushing each other to seriously consider racism is action, as are grappling with privilege and acting as allies. Only through action, and the mistakes we make and the lessons we learn, can we find ways to work in true solidarity.

7. "Radical" doesn't necessarily mean getting arrested, engaging in police confrontations, or taking to the streets. These kinds of actions are important, but they're not the be-all and end-all of effective activism. Indeed, exclusively focusing on them ignores crucial questions of privilege and overlooks the diverse, radical ways that people resist oppression every day. In the wake of the WTO protests, for instance, many white activists are heavily focused on direct action. Yet in the words of anti-capitalist organizer Helen Luu, "the emphasis on this method alone often works to exclude people of colour because what is not being taken into account is the relationship between the racist (in)justice system and people of colour." Moreover, this emphasis can exclude the very radical demands, tactics, and kinds of organizing used by communities of color--struggling for police accountability, occupying ancestral lands, and challenging multinational polluters, among many others. All too frequently "radicalism" is defined almost solely by white, middle-class men. We can do better, though; and I mean we in the sense of all of us who struggle in diverse ways to go to the root--to dismantle power and privilege, and fundamentally transform our society.

8. Radical rhetoric, whether it's Marxist, anarchist, Situationist, or some dialect of activistspeak, can be profoundly alienating and can uphold white privilege. More than once, I've seen white radicals (myself included) take refuge in our own ostensibly liberatory rhetorical and analytical tools: Marxists ignoring "divisive" issues of cultural identity and autonomy; anarchists assuming that, since their groups have "no hierarchy," they don't need to worry about insuring space for the voices of folks who are traditionally marginalized; Situationist-inspired militants collapsing diverse systems of privilege and oppression into obscure generalizations; radical animal rights activists claiming that they obviously know better than communities of color. And this is unfortunately nothing new. While all of these analytical tools have value, like most tools, they can be used to uphold oppression even as they profess to resist it. Stay wary.

9. We simply cannot limit our anti-oppression work to the struggle against white supremacy. Systems of oppression and privilege intertwine and operate in extremely complex ways throughout our society. Racism, patriarchy, classism, heterosexism, able-ism, ageism, and others compound and extend into all spheres of our lives. Our activism often takes the form of focusing on one outgrowth at a time--combating prison construction, opposing corporate exploitation of low-wage workers, challenging devastating US foreign policies. Yet we have to continually integrate a holistic understanding of oppression and how it operates--in these instances, how state repression, capitalism, and imperialism rest on oppression and privilege. Otherwise, despite all of our so-called radicalism, we risk becoming dangerously myopic single-issue activists. "Watch these mono-issue people," warns veteran activist Bernice Johnson Reagon. "They ain't gonna do you no good." Whatever our chosen focuses as activists, we must work both to recognize diverse forms of oppression and to challenge them--in our society, our organizations, and ourselves.

10. We need to do all of this anti-racist, anti-oppressive work out of respect for ourselves as well as others. White supremacy is our problem as white people. We benefit from it and are therefore obligated to challenge it. This is no simplistic politics of guilt, though. People of color undeniably suffer the most from racism, but we are desensitized and scarred in the process. Struggling to become authentically anti-racist radicals and to fundamentally change our racist society, then, means reclaiming our essential humanity while forging transformative bonds of solidarity. In the end, we'll be freer for it.

*Thanks to 'www.activesolidarity.net' for permission to reprint this essay.
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