

Memorandum to oppressors — and to myself

The conclusion of a talk at St James's Church, Piccadilly, 20 June 1984



Notes on terminology

A relationship, interaction or social system is oppressive if it involves gains, benefits and advantages for some at the cost of losses, frustrations and harm for others. Oppressors are individuals, groups or classes who have more than their fair share of gains. The oppressed are those who have more than their fair share of losses. The archetypal oppressor lives in the northern hemisphere; is middle-class; is white; is male; has a senior position in a hierarchical institution.

Whether you are an oppressor or not depends on your location in an oppressive structure, not on your intention or wish. The question is what are you doing to transform the structure, not whether you wish to be an oppressor.

1 Seek confrontation and opposition

Over and over you get things wrong. You are deformed and blinkered by your location and experience. You cannot trust yourself, not your eyesight, not your judgement. Seek out people who have very different location and experience—that is, the oppressed—and heed their critiques, criticism and challenges.

2 Flattery and chance

Day in and day out, people flatter you. For you control goods and goodies which they desire. The consequence of this flattery is that you suppose with pride that you are in your present position through your own merit and achievement. But no, you are where you are through

chance, not choice. You live in a society in which people with certain attributes (gender, race, class, nation) get rewarded and flattered.

3 Don't divide and rule

There is a diversity of interests, concerns and priorities amongst the oppressed, and many are prevented—for example by the mass media and by the educational system—from knowing the dimension and contours of their oppression. You must not take, let alone seek, advantage from this diversity and lack of awareness.

4 Selfishness and self-interest

All human beings defend their self-interest, yes of course, and all in this do things which are morally wrong. But only oppressors have the power to define which wrong actions are crimes. Also oppressors have the power to define the signs, symbols and conventions of courtesy and considerateness. In consequence of this dual power, oppressors typically think they are morally superior to the oppressed. They are not. Never forget this.

5 Positive action

Regardless of any formal equal opportunities policies which may be around, you should be engaging continually in positive discrimination. Do everything you can to distribute power, influence, resources and goods to or towards the oppressed. You will often have to do this covertly rather than openly: so be it.

6 Acknowledgements

Everyone peppers their discourse and conversation with bibliographical footnotes—references to people from whom they have learnt, and/or people who are big names. Make sure that you yourself, in your footnotes and references, give credit only to the oppressed. This means—amongst other things—that you should indeed reckon to have your mind nurtured only or mainly by the oppressed.

7 The climate of oppressor opinion

Transformation of the system will come, if it comes at all, from the oppressed. You yourself have only a small part to play. But one thing you can do, and should do, is criticise, cajole, badger, pester, speak out, in the forums, informal as well as formal, of the oppressor. But watch out: don't let them dress you in the cap and bells of a court jester, or the stiff righteous collar of a prig.

8 Double-agents

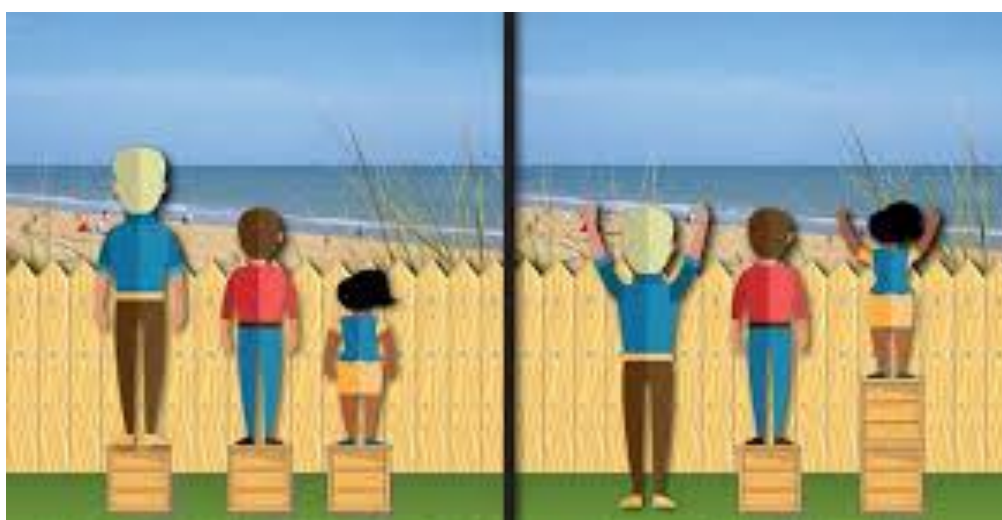
As long as you stay where you are it is possible that you will work, whether you wish to or intend to or not, against the interests of the oppressed. For example, and in particular, you are part of the velvet glove round the oppressor's iron fist; you may be containing resistance, buying time for the oppressor, that's all. One consequence of this is that you have no right or reason to expect gratitude, sympathy or trust from the oppressed.

9 Lifestyle

Look at your possessions, your personal time, your personal space and mobility: you are very comfortable, and very corrupt. You cannot completely change your lifestyle as long as you stay in your location. But you can keep it modest and frugal; you can share it; you can treat it lightly; and you can—and you must—risk it.

10 Words and platforms

The essential educational task is to equip the oppressed with words—the ABC, the first two Rs, Shakespeare and all that. Part of the essential political task is to provide them with platforms—a hearing in the places and spaces where a rule is to listen (words + platforms = communicative competence). Often you yourself should be silent, or at least your memoranda should be unmemorable. But sometimes you may speak, you may use both words and platforms. Choose them, choose them with care.



*Robin Richardson, St James's Church, Piccadilly, 20 June 1984, published in **Daring to be a Teacher: essays, stories and memoranda**, Trentham Books 1990, pp 205-07.*