

Social Movements and Social Change

1. Introduction

In the last two lectures, I've argued that culture frames the possibilities for thought and action so that certain morally relevant facts are eclipsed and others distorted. However, a cultural technē is not a rigid frame, but a set of tools made ready for use in certain ways, and not everyone uses the tools in the same way or finds them fitting for the jobs they need done. So in cases of ideological oppression there will be some who are able to gain knowledge of morally relevant facts that are for others inaccessible or unavailable; this may be knowledge that the practices are morally problematic. If so, then they are entitled (even required!) to resist the practices and demand change. The resistance is just the beginning, however, for justice requires a resolution of the conflict on terms that all can (in principle) endorse. Under good circumstances (with critical inquiry, support, and such) we can collectively recognize that different practices will be more just and, ideally, will be better for all. And under even better circumstances, we will have the resources to change them.

Resistance may be made by individuals, but there are many reasons that it is best undertaken as a collective enterprise.

- There is greater credibility when many judge a practice to be harmful or unjust. The resistance of a few is easily ignored, silenced, or eliminated.
- Achieving social justice is not just a matter of changing our own behavior, but changing social meanings so that we all have a more just choice architecture for coordination, a better appreciation of the value of resources, and fairer ways to produce and distribute them.
- The viability of an alternative form of collective action is more plausible if it has been tried.

This is why resistance takes the form of contentious politics and, specifically, social movements. There is no doubt that it is important to gain the support of (and train) elites so that you can convince lawyers to take your case to the Supreme Court, and lobbying legislators to pass new laws. And state action is often effective in incentivizing more just and less harmful behavior (Lessig 1995; Thaler and Sunstein 2009). However, social movements seek cultural change through reconfiguring social meanings and disrupting material conditions (e.g., monkeywrenching, curb cuts). In addition to new laws and policies, we need new tools in our cultural technē.

2. Sexism/Racism as homeostatic systems

Given the “practice first” account of ideology I've sketched, I recommend we think of racism and sexism not as ideologies but as *ideological formations*. I've argued that an ideology is a cultural technē – the web of meanings, symbols, scripts, and such – that functions to create or stabilize unjust social relations. The unjust practices, institutions, and such *guided* or *formed* by an ideology are ideological formations.

Racism, on my view, is constituted by an interconnected web of unjust social practices that unjustly disadvantage certain groups, e.g., residential segregation, police brutality, biased hiring and wage inequity, educational disadvantage, etc. These are not random practices, but are connected by a racist technē. The same is true of sexism. Consider the connections between inadequate sex education, inadequate health care and birth control, male violence, gendered parenting practices, wage-labor opportunities and demands. Due to the looping effects that connect agents, meanings, and material conditions, the sexist and racist technēs are both a product and a source of sexism.

Why worry about the difference between ideologies and ideological formations? Consider the question: What explains enduring inequality/injustice? There is a history of answering by pointing to bad attitudes, bias, bigotry, and other problematic psychological states. Note, however, that practices are what distribute things of value and disvalue: toxic waste is dumped in poor Black neighborhoods and good schools built in the White suburbs. Women are channeled into part-time jobs to make time for mothering and become economically dependent on male partners who are more economically secure. Of course, these practices are not arbitrary; there is no surprise where the good stuff ends up. But the distribution of goods doesn't end up how it does because of what most people believe, for it is just as true that individuals share racist and sexist beliefs because they live in a world in which certain groups get the good stuff. We learn about race and what different races and sexes “deserve,” or what is “best” for them, by looking around us. Moreover, as Elizabeth Anderson notes in her analysis of the abolition of slavery in Britain:

Even after most individuals are persuaded that slavery is wrong, that is not enough to change habits of conduct underwritten by shared expectations and attitudes. Private convictions within a group, even if held by most or all, do not overturn longstanding conditional commitments of a group to accept contrary convictions, or to act in accordance with them. (Anderson 2014, 9)

This suggests that durable injustice is a systematic phenomenon best understood in terms of dynamic homeostasis (Mallon 2003, Boyd 1999). Consider a homeostatic system such as stick in a stream held against a rock by the backwash. A stick floats down the stream and cannot pass over the rock because each time it approaches the rock, it is dragged down into the churning water that the rock produces. Ecosystems are homeostatic systems. Our bodies are homeostatic systems (body temperature regulation is a standard example). What is important in characterizing a homeostatic system is that there is a mechanism (or set of mechanisms) that register changes in a system and prompt counter-measures to resist or reverse the change.



Plausibly, any stable society is a dynamic homeostasis. The economy, the culture, the geographic conditions, the food supply, the legal system, transportation system etc., function to enable individuals to coordinate. The system is stable but dynamic. Changes in climate, or laws, or the economy, can prompt development: the adjustments in response to changes in a part don't always return the system exactly to the original state but can allow a shift to new terms of coordination.

There are multiple determinants of social stratification in a society, e.g., wealth, status, power, opportunity, to name a few. And in a stratified society, there are mechanisms that stably position groups hierarchically along these dimensions. Homeostasis explains the persistence of hierarchy: changes in part of the system are adjusted for elsewhere so that the status quo is maintained. This is a depressing fact. The fact that the system is dynamic offers some hope: although relatively stable, there are historical developments: the adjustments don't always return the system exactly to the original state but can allow a shift to a different sort of hierarchical structure. But there is no guarantee that change brings progress towards justice. For example, in the case of African-Americans, slavery evolved into racial segregation, which evolved into the current hierarchy maintained by mass incarceration, ghettoization, economic marginalization, and cultural stigma. Entry of increasing number of women in the paid workforce resulted in the second shift; women's increased sexual freedom has resulted in even more predatory masculine behavior.

There are times when it is important to single out ideology, beliefs, or emotional states as a significant factor in response to certain questions (Blum 2002, Garcia 1996; cf. Mills 2003, Shelby 2002). But to focus entirely on beliefs, or compassion, or ideology would be tantamount to explaining why the temperature of the room remains constant by simply pointing to the fact that the thermostat is set at 68F. The workings of the thermostat and the heating/cooling system are crucial to understanding the phenomenon of stable temperature, just as the process by which cultural technē are formed, performed, and reinscribed through their impact on the material conditions explains social stability and evolution (Haslanger 2015).

This suggests that there are three reasons why philosophical argumentation and rational deliberation are insufficient to promote social change: (i) A cultural technē limits what individuals can experience and value, and what they count as reasons. (An argument for this was included in the handout for Lecture 2, p. 3 "Value" (sections incorrectly numbered!), that I skipped in the lecture.) Culturally informed reasoning will often lack resources for self-critique, and the universal laws of logic won't be sufficient. (ii) Even if the majority become convinced that a better way is needed or more just, the pressures of coordination block change. (iii) The material conditions have been shaped to support the dominant structure, and these conditions are so entrenched that they limit real possibilities. But if not rational argumentation, what are our other options for promoting change (besides violent revolution!). How can we make a difference?

3. Social Movements

If social structures are homeostatic systems, then it is not surprising that social change is difficult. How is it even possible? Even if moral heroes attempt to bring about change, won't the system adjust to prevent them from doing so?

In her work on the abolition of slavery, Elizabeth Anderson (2014), drawing on Charles Tilly (Tilly and Tarrow 2007), has sketched the elements of contentious politics. Social movements are a form of contentious politics. In cases of broad social injustice,

What is required is practical action to dislodge shared expectations, unsettle attitudes, and trigger practical deliberation. This requires concerted mass public action, effectively demonstrating a collective rejection of the entrenched norms — a dissolution of the prior shared expectations — and a determination to replace them with rival norms.

At the same time, we should not dismiss moral argument as inert. Contention is required to trigger practical deliberation, but deliberation makes use of reasons and arguments to find better alternatives to entrenched customs. (12)

Recall that the point of a cultural technē is to provide a collective basis for communication and coordination. Then, the first step to motivate critical reflection and invite transformation is to change the circumstances so that reliance on the problematic cultural technē does not achieve the intended coordination. As Anderson points out:

Between pure argument and violence is a wide range of contentious activities that are more or less disruptive of habitual ways of life, from petitioning, publicity campaigns, theatrical performances, candlelight vigils, litigation, and political campaigns to street demonstrations, boycotts, teach-ins, sit-ins, picketing, strikes, and building occupations. (9)

Refusal to comply with an existing cultural technē and its norms raises questions about its aptness (Anderson 2014, 10). Because people unthinkingly conform to norms on the assumption that others will as well, a refusal to comply makes the norm available for reflection. Resistance also reduces the motivation to continue conforming to the norm, since the norm is failing to provide a basis for coordination. And if the resistance can claim a moral ground, then those who nevertheless continue to comply with the norm lose credibility, legitimacy, and status.

Social movements also disrupt coordination by changing the material conditions within which the practice takes place. Street demonstrations make it impossible for people to use the roadways; strikes make it impossible for work to continue "as usual." But not all change in the material conditions need be as explicitly challenging, disruptive, or unruly. For example, it can make a difference to change a seating arrangement in a room, or create a new space for informal interaction between groups that are normally

segregated, or a new space where the subordinated can gather without interference or monitoring.

But, of course, not all social movements are warranted, and not all of them move us in the direction of justice. Change is not always change for the better. How can we be confident that the movement is promoting progress?

Anderson suggests two criteria. First, dominant social practices rely upon the endorsement and enforcement of the powerful. In some cases the powerful mistakenly believe in the justice of the practices and enforce them sincerely, and sometimes they support them more cynically. (“Such is the narcissism of the powerful that they confuse their own depraved and selfish desires with divinely ordained morality, and make themselves gods in imposing oppressive laws on their subordinates.” (22)) However, the ability of the powerful to insist on the practice is diminished if it becomes clear, through the social movement, that they are biased, and lack credibility and moral legitimacy: either the powerful themselves recognize the need for correction, or see that their power is slipping. In either case, they are motivated to loosen their grip on the practices in question and new forms of coordination can emerge.

The criterion for progress here is *critical* and *epistemic*: if the powerful are in fact biased and misrepresent their own self-interests as binding on others, and so are wrong about the justice of the practices they support, then there is reason to seek alternatives. It is possible, however, that some social movements rely on biased and false claims and destabilize legitimate power. In such cases, the movement should be resisted, for it cannot claim to be a source of moral improvement.

Anderson’s second criterion is *practical*. Social movements must not only undermine the existing unjust structures, but must propose alternatives. She supports Mill’s idea that moral ideas are tested through *experiments in living*: “[T]he ultimate test of moral progress must lie in critical reflection on the results of a social movement, in the experiences of those living under the new norms that an effective social movement establishes.” (15; also Anderson 1991) In short, we form a new conception of how to live and try to live the new way. We then consider: is it an improvement? She suggests:

What makes a conception of the good an empirically grounded one is that it leaves itself vulnerable to criticism by the felt experiences of those who attempt to live up to it. Unreduced value judgments are susceptible to refutation by experience because our ethical experiences are not mere creatures of our beliefs...it is possible to judge one way about what is good, but to feel quite differently about it. The conflict between one's beliefs about what is valuable and what one finds in one's experiences to be moving or valuable provides the first evidence that a theory of the good is mistaken. The explanation for this conflict provides the first evidence for a rival theory of the good. (1991, 26)

But are the experiences under the new regime morally authoritative? We might be struggling because the change is too much for us to handle, or because we cannot get over our old habits of mind and action. And the new set of social structures might also be ideologically sustained and cause the subordinate to participate willingly in spite of its injustice. As we’ve discussed, we become attuned to the structures that coordinate us; this makes it hard to find an experiential basis from which to judge the moral acceptability of our conditions. Thus it seems that such a criterion is only plausible if we can rule out ideological oppression in the first place. But the criterion is supposed to help us determine what is ideological, i.e., sustaining injustice, and what isn’t.

How might we spell out this second criterion? I argued before that in the case of unjust systems, there will likely be some who are suffering and know that the suffering is wrong. It is their experience – and the moral claims that arise from it – that forms the basis for contentious politics. If, through an effective social movement, a new form of life, a new set of social practices, is attempted, then a first idea is that a criterion of its success is whether those who were suffering are relieved, and whether or not they are simply replaced by others who are now suffering instead.

We should be a bit cautious here, however, for just as the initial account of moral knowledge does not take just any claim of suffering to be authoritative, likewise we should place some conditions on the acceptance of such claims as a basis for moral evaluation. In my last lecture I argued that we need a moral epistemology that enables us to identify the circumstances in which experience is most likely to provide moral knowledge. This is an empirical project. But there are some very basic conditions we know must be met. In particular, the social context must provide some very basic tools for critical reflection and epistemic agency. Robin Celikates (2006) puts it this way:

The critique of ideology...can therefore be understood as directed against such closed social conditions and symbolic representations that hinder the use of critical and judgmental capacities in social practices, that block the transformation of capacities into abilities and prevent the practical realization of one’s self-understanding as a judging and acting subject. (35)

On Celikates’ view, the critique of epistemic practices is as far as one can go with ideology critique, for the critic must remain morally neutral. On my view, however, there is a dialectic between a critique of the moral and epistemic: we critique the epistemic in order to enable moral knowledge, which in turn, can provide a basis for further epistemic critique through a richer understanding of agency, knowledge, and well-being.

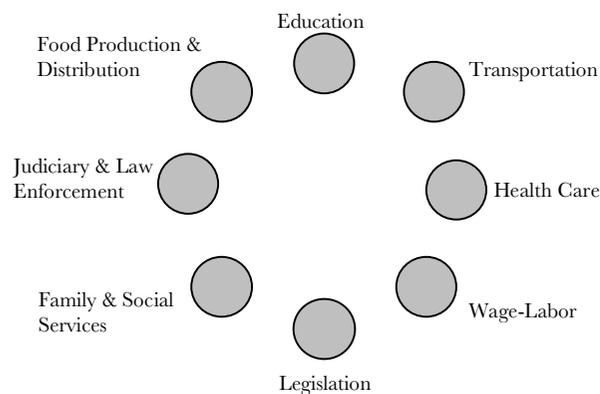
So, on my view, we can (defeasibly, contextually) rely on a social movement that (a) raises legitimate challenges to the biases of those who benefit from and maintain the social structures, and (b) offers alternatives to the existing practices that can

(eventually?) be tested under conditions that are epistemically empowering and are not, in turn, rejected.

4. Systematic change

Of course, individual minds coordinate with other individual minds (and the world) on terms that are always up for negotiation. Sometimes we negotiate with others over the terms of coordination, other times we unilaterally change the world to force a renegotiation, and yet other times, the world changes and forces us all to come up with something new (think of global warming!).

However, the goal in social movements is not to change attitudes. To end racism, sexism, and other forms of injustice we have to dismantle society as we know, i.e., to dismantle the practices we both engage in and identify with. This isn't just about what is effective, but what ending racism consists in. And to do this, we must work together on all fronts. The system is large and complicated. Each of us must pick our battles and choose a domain that we can affect. We must also work in coalition with others. This is a daunting task. Consider:



We must collectively find ways to change:

- Elites
- Bureaucrats
- Institutions
- Culture
- Technology
- Land/Space
- Individuals

With sensitivity to history, geography, and biology.

Obviously, this is not a program. But it is important to see a big picture, in part, because there are so many entry points, so many possibilities. It is not up to one person alone, or even one group alone.

To maintain hope, I offer Rebecca Solnit's insights:

Cause-and-effect assumes history marches forward, but history is not an army. It is a crab scuttling sideways, a drip of soft water wearing away stone, an earthquake breaking centuries of tension. Sometimes one person inspires a movement, or her words do decades later; sometimes a few passionate people change the world; sometimes they start a mass movement and millions do; sometimes those millions are stirred by the same outrage or the same ideal, and change comes upon us like a

change of weather. All that these transformations have in common is that they begin in the imagination, in hope.

I say all this because hope is not like a lottery ticket you can sit on the sofa and clutch, feeling lucky. I say it because hope is an ax you break down doors with in an emergency; because hope should shove you out the door, because it will take everything you have to steer the future away from endless war, from the annihilation of the earth's treasures and the grinding down of the poor and marginal. Hope just means another world might be possible, not promised, not guaranteed. Hope calls for action....

Action by all of us. Action together.

Works Cited

Anderson, Elizabeth. 1991. "John Stuart Mill and Experiments in Living." *Ethics* 102(1): 4-26.

_____. 2014. "Social Movements, Experiments in Living and Moral Progress: Case Studies from Britain's Abolition of Slavery." *The Lindley Lecture*, University of Kansas.

Blum, Lawrence. Blum, Lawrence. 2002. *I'm Not a Racist, But...* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Boyd, Richard. 1999. 1999. "Homeostasis, Species and Higher Taxa." Robert A. Wilson (ed.), *Species: New Interdisciplinary Essays*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 141-86.

Celikates, Robin. 2006. "From Critical Social Theory to a Social Theory of Critique: On the Critique of Ideology after the Pragmatic Turn." *Constellations* 13(1): 21-40.

Garcia, J.L.A. 1996. "The Heart of Racism," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 27: 5-45,

Haslanger, Sally. 2017. "Racism, Ideology, and Social Movements." *Res Philosophica* (online).

_____. 2015. "Social Structure, Narrative, and Explanation." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 45(1): 1-15.

Lessig, Lawrence. 1995. The regulation of social meaning. *University of Chicago Law Review* 62(3): 943-1045.

Mallon, Ron. 2003. "Social Roles, Social Construction, and Stability." F. Schmitt (ed.), *Socializing Metaphysics*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, pp. 327-53.

Mills, Charles. 2003. "'Heart' Attack: A Critique of Jorge Garcia's Volitional Conception of Racism." *The Journal of Ethics* 7(1): 29-62.

Shelby, Tommie. 2002. "Is racism in the 'heart'?" *Journal of Social Philosophy* 33(3): 411-420.

Solnit, Rebecca (2016). *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities* (p. 4). Haymarket Books. Kindle Edition. <https://www.haymarketbooks.org/books/791-hope-in-the-dark>

Thaler, Richard H. and Cass Sunstein. 2009. *Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth, and Happiness*. London: Penguin.

Tilly, Charles and Sidney Tarrow. 2007. *Contentious Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.