

The Transformative Moment: An Introduction for Activists

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We are living in one of the most exciting times in history. It is a time of crisis and breakdown, and a time of potential transition to a new and more evolved economic and social stage. Diverse and vibrant movements for social transformation are springing up all around the world. The United States, while playing a reactionary role through its imperialist state policies and globalizing corporations, is also a locus of significant post-modern transformation. We call this time in the U.S. “the Transformative Moment,” to emphasize its potential for paradigmatic and systematic economic and social change.

The Transformative Moment can be understood as a deep-seated and many-faceted response to the imbalances, inequality, and lack of freedom created by the reigning economic and social paradigm, a paradigm which we call the Hierarchical Polarization Paradigm. In this booklet, we will first analyze the core elements of the Hierarchical Polarization Paradigm, and will then discuss seven transformative processes that various U.S. social movements are participating in now, processes which are beginning to construct a new, more balanced, free, equal and sustainable paradigm of economic and social life.

Our goal in this paper to provide activists in the U.S. with a new conceptual framework which will help them understand the transformative potential of the present historical conjuncture in the United States—the Transformative Moment.

HIERARCHICAL POLARIZATION PARADIGM

The Hierarchical Polarization Paradigm divides people and life itself into a number of distinct, purportedly independent, “hierarchical polarities.” Each hierarchical polarity is composed of two polarized, mutually exclusive, and unequal groups. Most of the hierarchical polarities create divisions among people; others divide realms of life.

HIERARCHICAL POLARIZATION PROCESSES

The Hierarchical Polarization Paradigm views the process of domination and subordination, and the various hierarchical polarities through which it is played out, as inevitable and God-given. However, the various hierarchical polarities are actually economic and social constructs. We call the social concepts, values, practices and institutions, which produce and reproduce hierarchical polarities, “hierarchical polarization processes.” We identify nine processes, which are present in nearly all of the various hierarchical polarities which have occurred in U.S. history.

Categoryization: The Hierarchical Polarization Paradigm creates mutually exclusive categories of people, along a variety of different criteria: white or Black, man or woman, colonizer or colonized, heterosexual or homosexual, American or foreigner, et cetera.

Ascription: Each person is assigned to one category in each hierarchical polarity at birth, based on some aspect of their being that they cannot control, such as biological sex, disability, skin color, sexual orientation, or parents’ group assignment/s. Each of these group assignments is made integral to the social identity of the person.

Polarization: Within each hierarchical polarity, the two categories of people are treated differently. They are assigned different personality traits and different, mutually exclusive, work and social activities, and in this way, are made to be socially different and opposite.

Hierarchization: Within each polarity, one group of people is viewed as superior to the other, in terms of its way of being, its traits and its work.

Domination/Subordination: Within each polarity, the group of people that is seen to be superior is given political and economic power over the other group, in terms of citizenship, civil rights, property rights, and pay.

Violence: The dominant group uses violence, both overt and institutionalized, to create, maintain and reproduce its domination; the subordinated group often rebels violently against its subordination, only to be “put down” with more violence by the dominant group.

Rationalization: Each hierarchical polarity is justified by religious dogma (as “God-given”) and/or by science (as “natural”).

Internalization: Authoritarian parenting, education, and other social institutions cause people to internalize each hierarchical polarity, i.e. accept its dictates and expectations of them and of others. In this way, groups that are oppressed can come to “internalize their oppression.”

Stigmatization: Social stigmatization, such as teasing, ostracism, and in extreme cases, group violence, punishes those who don’t conform, i.e. who don’t behave according to their assigned roles.

TRANSFORMATION OF HIERARCHICAL POLARIZATION

Because hierarchical polarities restrict freedom, and cause deprivation and inequality, they usually engender resistance in many forms, from slave revolts to anti-colonial struggles to women’s liberation movements to consciousness-raising groups and therapy.

Starting in the nineteenth century, and growing rapidly over the last 50 years, new, nonviolent approaches to resistance to hierarchical polarization have been developing, approaches which reject violence and struggles for domination in favor of more egalitarian modes of social power and transformation. We call these new types “transformative processes.”

The different transformative processes have emerged more or less sequentially, each process building on the preceding ones. The first five transformative processes focus on healing particular hierarchical polarizations; the last two begin to integrate the issues raised by the different hierarchical polarizations, and, through their transformative actions, to replace the Hierarchical Polarization Paradigm with a new, nonhierarchical, more just and sustainable paradigm.

Questioning Processes:

The questioning process challenges the rationalizations, and internalization of these rationalizations, that under-gird the Hierarchical Polarization Paradigm, by asking questions about aspects of a hierarchical polarity that are taken for granted. Questioning processes are supported by self-conscious reflection, and by true scientific investigation and education.

Questioning processes are the sine qua non for the transformation of hierarchical polarities, and of the Hierarchical Polarization Paradigm. For this reason, the ability to think for oneself, and to think critically about social roles, values, practices and institutions, is key to the Transformative Moment.

Equal Opportunity Processes:

Equal opportunity processes are struggles by members of the subordinated groups, and their allies, to gain political and economic rights, social treatment, and economic opportunities equal to those of the dominating group. Equal opportunity processes challenge every hierarchical polarization process, and are a key force in breaking down the injustices, imbalances, and lack of freedom of the Hierarchical Polarization Paradigm.

The United States itself was established as part of an equal opportunity process. With their famous, liberatory claim that “all (white) men are created equal,” the Founding Fathers not only declared political independence from their British colonizers, but also formally overturned the aristocrat/commoner hierarchical polarization. White women and people of color, of course, were excluded from this declaration of equality, and so they participated in their own equal opportunity processes over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These equal opportunity movements have made major strides in eliminating the particular discrimination they are targeting. All continue their fights today, because discrimination and segregation persist.

All of these equal opportunity movements are based in “identity politics” in the sense that their members are overwhelmingly members of a particular subordinated group fighting for equality with a particular dominant group.

Valuing-the-Devalued Processes

Valuing-the-devalued processes tend to accompany, or come on the heels of, equal opportunity processes. A key part of the Hierarchical Polarization Paradigm is the devaluation both of the people placed in the subordinate group, and of the traits and activities associated with them. A central aspect of Civil Rights, feminist, gay, and disability movement has been the fight against this devaluation. These movements respond directly to the devaluation created by the Hierarchical Polarization Paradigm, and also compensate for imbalances created by the previous equal opportunity process. In the equal opportunity process, subordinated groups struggled for equality, specifically equality with white, able-bodied, heterosexual men. These struggles, by their very nature, tended to set their sights upon gaining what the dominant group had, or becoming like the dominant group, and to implicitly accept and even reinforce the reigning social and economic devaluation of people and work that are located in the subordinated category.

Integrative Processes

Integrative processes bring together people, characteristics, or activities that were polarized and made opposite by the Hierarchical Polarization Paradigm. As we have seen, U.S. economic and social values, practices, and institutions separate and differentiate people, human traits and ways of being, and spheres of life. We are supposed to be different from, and do different things than, those in the opposite categories. People and social movements engaged in integrative processes, individually and/or in groups, reject one or more of these polarities as restrictive, unbalanced, and unhealthy, and set out to combine things which were previously seen to be mutually exclusive.

Whenever we see what was previously polarized being combined, we have the integrative process at work. When people marry across race, and interracial people acknowledge their entire heritage, the integrative process is at work. When consumers, workers, and managers bring their spiritual values – values like justice, equality, sustainability – into their economic decisions, the integrative process is at work. By transforming the way people are and act, integrative processes begin to qualitatively restructure social values and institutions.

Discernment Processes

Whereas integrative processes combine what was polarized, discernment processes subject each pole of each hierarchical polarity, and the values, practices and institutions constructed around that those polarities, to serious critical evaluation. In particular, the discernment process involves identifying and redressing the distortions and injustices caused by polarization and domination/subordination. The integrative process, which we discussed above, combines poles and transcends polarization; the discernment process follows as we redefine ourselves freed from restrictive polarizations.

Discernment also addresses the distortions and injustices caused by domination/subordination. Those who belong to dominant groups have been actively or passively involved in unjust and oppressive economic and social institutions, which they have benefited from. In the past, they were able to rationalize their actions and privileges, however, as knowledge about the various oppressive and unjust hierarchical polarization processes has expanded, some members of the dominating group are actively rejecting their privilege. Further, personal experiences with members of subordinated groups in equal opportunity workplaces and desegregated schools have also eroded dominator group members’ beliefs in their natural superiority.

Discernment takes different forms for people in subordinated groups. A person in a subordinated category tends to be more critical of the hierarchical polarity that oppresses them, and more active in struggles to transform it, than those in the dominator group, as we have seen in our discussions of previous processes. People in subordinated groups stop internalizing the hierarchical polarity which oppresses them by making changes in their perceptions and behavior.

The Last Two Processes: Challenging Separations

The first five transformative processes seek to heal the various hierarchical polarities both within individuals, and as they are manifested within economic and social institutions. These transformative processes also support one another in key ways. These represent a huge step forward in economic and social development.

However, the first five transformative processes tend not to challenge the separations among specific hierarchical polarities, and so the various movements which embody these processes tend to be based in single-issue, single-identity politics, such as anti-racist, or feminist, or pro-worker, or environmental, or gay rights, or disability, etc. To be fully effective, transformative social movements need to incorporate the last two processes, the combining and diversifying/unifying/globalizing processes.

The Combining Process

The combining process connects and combines together consciousness-raising and social action vis a vis two or more hierarchical polarities. It begins to break down the compartmentalizing aspect of the hierarchical dualist system, laying the foundation for the systematic transformation of our economy and society into a higher stage. The combining process is a natural outcome of the other processes, because the various hierarchical polarities are all interconnected.

Initial second wave feminist organizing of the 1970's, for instance, tried to unite all members as women, but still marginalized certain groups within the movement, and downplayed or ignored their political issues. Many of these excluded groups felt the need to split off from the white-heterosexual-middle-class-dominated mainstream feminist movement, forming groups of their own, and creating feminist theory and practice that spoke to their issues. This set the stage for the complicated, many-faceted combining process, which began to extend feminist movement beyond the compartmentalization of polarities, issues, and identities. The combining process taught many white middle class heterosexual feminists (ourselves included) about racism, classism, and homophobia. Based on this learning, many feminist groups are now aspiring to become multi-issue movements that truly address the issues of all women.

A second source of the combining process is the coming together of movements because they have a shared goal or "enemy." The economic dislocation and environmental destruction brought about by corporate globalization, with its neoliberal agenda of Free Trade and new institution, the World Trade Organization, has brought together diverse, grass-roots movements from around the world. These united groups fight corporate abuses and neo-liberal globalization, in a process which has been called "globalization from below".

In these ways, the combining process has been creating ties of understanding and solidarity among people involved in different social movements, across the globe, laying the groundwork for the last process, the diversifying/unifying/globalizing process.

The Diversifying/Unifying/Globalizing Process

The diversifying/unifying/globalizing process is building on all of the other six processes to birth a new kind of consciousness, and new types of political and economic organizing. This new consciousness makes people capable of directing and coordinating all of the other processes in a wonderful symphony of systemic personal-and-social healing and transformation. The diversifying/unifying/globalizing process is the newest of all the transformative process, so it is only beginning to be expressed. Nevertheless, it has already spawned entirely new concepts and forms of movement capable of achieving the transition to a post-Hierarchical-Polarization-Paradigm country and world.

This process expresses, calls for, and works towards -- a socially responsible "citizen of the world" consciousness which is based on unity or a sense of oneness with all human beings, and indeed, with all of life. People involved in this process acknowledge and defend civil and human rights, economic justice, freedom, and democracy for every human being in the world, while acknowledging and embracing the diversity of ways to construct free and equitable people and institutions. Such people actively seek balance, connection, integration, equalization – of the parts within themselves, and of all the rich diversity of people and life forms on earth.

Such a consciousness does not flow from a sense of self-sacrifice, but rather out of an understanding that one will not be fully healed, whole, and fulfilled if he or she is not positively engaged in living his/her larger life in such a manner. Such a person embodies the questioning process, listening to her inner voice, the voice of conscience, the voice which rejects any and all social mandates and structures which go against his or her core inner values.

The diversifying/unifying/globalizing process is exemplified by the annual World Social Forum, and the hundreds of other similarly-organized forums that now take place yearly throughout the world. These forums build on the combining of groups in response to the many destructive, oppressive, and life-threatening aspects of our global capitalist economic system. People working in the vast diversity of social and political movements have begun to come together, to work together to begin to envision and create new economic and social structures. The focus is on listening to one another, learning from one another, forming cross-country alliances, and creating and advocating for new values, practices and institutions which respect all of life.

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The seven transformative processes, developed and honed through over a century of struggles, provide us with the tools to dismantle the Hierarchical Polarization Paradigm, and build more egalitarian, peaceful, loving, free, and democratic economic and social values, practices and institutions. We are blessed to have been born into such an historic, transformative moment, and it is up to each of us to do what we can to help guide our world to this possible future.

Some Key Hierarchical Polarities in the U.S.

Hierarchical Polarity	Superior & Dominant	Inferior & Subordinated
Gender	Males/Men	Females/Women
Nationalism	Citizens of our country	Citizens of another country
Colonialism	Colonizer	Colonized
Race	“Whites”	“Blacks” or “Colored People”
Sexuality	Heterosexuals	Homosexuals
Man/nature	Homo Sapiens	All other forms of life
Secularism	Material life	Religion, Spirituality

TRANSFORMATIVE PROCESSES	ASPECT OF PARADIGM CHALLENGED	BASIC THRUST OF PROCESS
Transformative Processes that Challenge the Various Hierarchical Polarities		
Questioning/Envisioning	View of social identities and relationships as natural or God-given ; assertion that there is no other way	Why are things this way? Isn't that particular social institution unfair? What might be better?
Equal Opportunity	View that certain people are naturally superior to others; resultant restriction of rights of subordinated group	All are created equal; members of a devalued group should have the rights that the valued group has.
Valuing the Devalued	Devaluation of subordinated peoples, along with their traits and activities	The values, traits and works of the devalued group are important and valuable, and need to be recognized and revalued
Integrating	View that certain people, ways of being, values, and traits cannot/should not be combined; resultant polarization/segregation	It is healthy and balanced to integrate social spaces and relationships, and to combine polarities in people and activities
Discernment	Negative aspects of ways of being, values, character traits, and works resulting from hierarchy and/or polarization	Critical reexamination of the basic building blocks of our social order so as to free them from distortion
Transformative Processes that Challenge Multiple Hierarchical Polarities and the Entire Hierarchical Polarization Paradigm		
Combining	Assumption that hierarchical-polarity-created groups are homogeneous, and disconnected from one another	Expansion beyond single-issue, identity-politics-based organizing; expansion of one's sense of solidarity
Diversifying/Unifying/Globalizing	Inevitability of polarization, domination, and violence; fragmentation of individuality and of social movements; the Hierarchical Polarization Paradigm itself	Solidarity amidst diversity; globalization from below; socially responsible economic behavior, constructing a new paradigm