



Oppression for the Course on Equality

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Abstract:

In this essay there is an attempt to explore the concept of oppression in its true form. The problem in deciphering this concept lies with its invisibility as a structure or system. The essay borrows from the classic essays by Marilyn frye and iris marion young. In addition Alison bailey's piece gives in the account as to why oppression of one group is always linked with the privileged position of another. To be oppressed is not a choice as it is a result of long established system, but the individual has the role in realizing it and then acting in consonance with others of his group to overcome it. This is the responsibility of the individual that he has to take control over his own life. Another important aspect is that by taking a causal fatalistic notion of oppression people start with internalization of oppression (Bartky1 979, 1984; Itzin 1985; Pheterson 1987.) Judgements of responsibility are thus relative to their contexts and the purposes for which they are made. They may also be quite complex, especially since more than one person, indeed millions of people, may be responsible, in some degree, for a situati.

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1. Introduction

One consequence of increasing our knowledge of the power and pervasiveness of the social forces acting on women is that we tend to focus upon women's victimization. This enables us to see that the causes of much of our own and other women's suffering, are not ultimately within our control, and that no one could reasonably expect us to have avoided them. But such a thought makes us see the oppressed (women in this case) as unfinished, capable of change, and incapable of gaining power to direct their lives.

The radical feminist philosopher, Marilyn Frye, raised this issue, which she characterized as the problem of reconciling responsibility and history, in a short essay published in 1985. She wrote: oppression of women is something women do not choose. Those of our activities and attitudes which play into women's oppression are themselves strategies we are forced into by the circumstances of oppression we live with. A woman may continue to live with the man, who batters her, but the choice to remain is not a free one; it is a choice among evils in a severely constrained situation, and she has not chosen that situation. Even if shown that choices exist, it is often the case that our knowledge, our ability to judge, and our desires have been so distorted and manipulated by social influences as to make a mockery of the idea that we choose freely.

2. Defining oppression and its intertwinedness with privilege

Oppression is something consisting of and accomplished by a network of institutions and material and ideological forces. The oppressed are not simply free to walk away from this servitude at will. The root of the word "oppression" is the element "press." Presses are used to mold things or flatten them or reduce them in bulk. Something pressed is something caught between or among forces and barriers which are so related to each other that jointly they restrain, restrict or prevent the thing's motion or mobility, to immobilize it, to reduce it.

The experience of oppressed people is that the living of one's life is confined and shaped by forces and barriers which are not accidental or occasional and hence avoidable, but are systematically related to each other in such a way as to catch one between and among them and restrict or penalize motion in any direction. It is the experience of being caged in: all avenues, in every direction, are blocked.

Cages: Consider a birdcage. If you look very closely at just one wire in the cage, you cannot see the other wires. If your conception of what is before you is determined by this myopic focus, you could look at that one wire, up and down the length of it, and be unable to see why a bird would not just fly around the wire any time it wanted to go somewhere. Furthermore, even if, one day at a time, you myopically inspected each wire, you still could not see why a bird would give trouble going past the wires to get anywhere. There is no physical property of any one wire, nothing that the closest scrutiny could discover, that will reveal how a bird could be inhibited or harmed by it except in the most accidental way. It is only when you step back, stop looking at the wires one by one, microscopically, and take a macroscopic view of the whole cage, that you can see why the bird does not go anywhere; and then you will see it in a moment. It will require no great subtlety of mental powers. It is perfectly obvious that the bird is surrounded by a network of systematically related barriers, no one of which would be the least hindrance to its flight, but which, by their relations to each other, are as confining as the solid walls of a dungeon.

It is now possible to grasp one of the reasons why oppression can be hard to see and recognize: one can study the elements of an oppressive structure with great care and some good will without seeing the structure as a whole, and hence without seeing or being able to understand that one is looking at a cage and that there are people there who are caged, whose motion and mobility are restricted, whose lives are shaped and reduced.

Oppression as the product of systematically related barriers and forces not of one's own making. any understanding of oppression is incomplete without recognition of the role privilege plays in maintaining systems of domination. Saying that if someone pay for your dinner, it is privilege puts the term "privilege" in danger of being stretched to meaninglessness. Events, incidents of oppression need to be seen in the context of historical, social, and political units, and not as individual incidents. Members of oppressed groups commonly experience "double-binds," that is, they are faced daily with situations in which their options are reduced to a very few, all of which expose them to penalty censure, or deprivation' (1983,2).

These binds are created and shaped by forces and barriers which are neither accidental nor avoidable, but are systematically related to each other in ways that confine individuals to the extent that movement in any direction is penalized. Two important comments regarding Frye's observations about group membership and its role in systems of oppression.

First, because individuals are rarely members of one community, oppressions not a unified phenomenon. Group differences in race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, or class cut across individual lives to the point that privilege and oppression are often experienced simultaneously. Second, lack of a rigid definition of social groups is part of complex systems of domination. One of the features of privilege is the ability of dominant groups to construct, define, and control the construction of categories.

Bailey tries to bring out the distinction between privilege and advantages that parallels Frye's distinction between oppression and harm. Just as all oppression counts as harm, but not all harms count as oppression, I want to suggest that all privilege is advantageous, but that not all advantages count as privilege. The problem is the systematically conferred nature of these unearned assets.

An etymology of privilege rests on four related claims: (1) benefits granted by privilege are always unearned and conferred systematically to members of dominant social groups; (2) privilege granted to members of dominant groups simply because they are members of these groups is almost never justifiable; (3) most privilege is invisible to, or not recognized as such, by those who have it; and, (4) privilege has an unconditional “wild card” quality that extends benefits to cover a wide variety of circumstances and conditions.

Privileges are special rights belonging to the individual or class, and not the mass. The structured invisibility of privilege insures that a person’s individual accomplishments will be recognized more on the basis of individual merit (Bailey 1998) than on the basis of group membership.’

3. Fault Lines in Frye’s Conception

Women face restrictions which, on-balance, are harmful to them; they are imposed by social structures and expectations, and even within the law; women face them because of their status as women; and men both impose these barriers and benefit from them.

In Frye’s definition of ‘oppression,’ she details a particular image of the character of the barriers that a person must face to be oppressed (Frye 84). Frye identifies five necessary conditions that make up oppression. First, the person must be restricted; that is, there must be barriers or limitations on his freedom (Frye 85). In the case of women, they are restricted in not being permitted to go out at night, and making less at jobs. Second, the person must suffer harm from these restrictions; moreover, this harm must outweigh any potential benefits incurred as a result of those same restrictions (Frye 85). Women suffer harms as a result of their restrictions; they lose personal freedom and have less economic freedom. Third, the restrictions must have been imposed by a social structure or institution (Frye 85). The harms experienced by women are not isolated incidents; they are pervasive societal harms. Fourth, the person’s restrictions must have been incurred as a result of membership in a particular ‘social group’; that is to say, they occur on a systematic basis, rather than on an individual or random basis (Frye 87). Women suffer these harms as women. Fifth, and finally, there must be a separate social group that both benefits from the restrictions faced by a social group, and coercively imposes the social structures which restrict the freedom of the social group (Frye 89). Simply put, oppressive barriers must not only benefit another group, but the oppressed group cannot be the primary enforcers. In the case of women’s oppression, men both coercively impose these harms, and benefit from them; in particular, by diverting pay disproportionately, they themselves take a greater share.

Frye does not expressly define what constitutes a ‘social group’; presumably, Frye refers to a group that shares a common characteristic which has some political or social relevancy. It would follow, then, that the sexes, races, socioeconomic classes, sexual orientations, religions, professions, and other such classifications would logically constitute ‘social groups’ because they share common characteristics that affect their social status. A good measure of this could be whether or not the law could refer to this group as an identifiable group with a shared relevant characteristic. It is under this assumption that this argument shall proceed.

4. Objections to Frye: Narrowness

Frye’s definition of oppression serves her purpose very well; that is, it makes clear that women are oppressed and men are not. Women face restrictions which, on-balance, are harmful to them; they are imposed by social structures and expectations, and even within the law; women face them because of their status as women; and men both impose these barriers and benefit from them. However, the fifth condition, or condition of another benefiting social group which imposes the restrictive barriers upon the harmed group, is problematic. While it functions perfectly in Frye’s context, its applicability to other situations is imperfect.

One such problem is its inapplicability to legitimate situations of oppression. For example, it is reasonable to conclude that gay persons are oppressed.

However, Frye's definition would not agree. Gay persons do, in fact, fulfill many of her requisites; they suffer restrictions on their freedom, restrictions which, on-balance, are harmful to them. The barriers that they face are imposed by social structures and institutions, from religious organizations to the federal government. They constitute a 'social group' as defined above, as saying that someone is gay does identify a group of persons who share a particular socially relevant characteristic. However, the oppressor condition does not apply to gay persons in its entirety. In the fifth condition, while there is a group that imposes these barriers (heterosexual persons), this group does not benefit from them.

Some may disagree, as heterosexual couples gain from barriers imposed upon gay persons. They may point to things like the inability of gay persons to access work benefits for their partners as being of economic advantage to heterosexual persons, on-balance. However, the equal distribution of these benefits would make a very small change overall, and what employers may lose in offering fair benefits to gay employees' partners would presumably be made up in retention of that talent.

5. Objections to Frye: Broadness

While Frye's definition of 'oppression' leaves out these and several more legitimately oppressed groups, it also lets in a good many persons who do not appear to be oppressed. One such example is that of convicts. They are comprised of robbers, rapists, murderers, and other unsavory individuals who have harmed society and have been sent to a prison term as a result. Clearly, they are not oppressed persons because they have come to be in their position, as a result of harmful, immoral decisions. However, Frye's definition begs to differ; they face harmful barriers in their incarceration, from the basic loss of the freedom to move about at their leisure, to the inability to vote. They are incarcerated as a result of institutional laws, they suffer as a result of their membership in a social group (convicts), and there is another social group that both imposes these restrictions and benefits from them, that being non-criminal Americans. The benefit comes in where non-convicts suffer lower rates of crime and feel more secure as a result. Since Frye's definition does not contain moral criteria, convicts are not excluded simply because their punishment is in principle deserved. In sum, Frye's image of oppression lets in a group which is clearly not oppressed.

A criticism of this idea is that convicts do not constitute a social group. This is a difficult point to argue for or against due to Frye's neglect of defining her use of this term. A critic may say that convicts are not a social group because their membership in this group was the result of a conscious choice. However, so is one's choice of profession and religion, and in fact, most typical 'social group' categories aside from race and gender. Thus, it seems unreasonable to say that a person cannot be oppressed except as a result of their race or gender; people face oppression for a range of reasons, not all of which are ascribed personal characteristics. Further, convicts are commonly referred to in the law, which identifies them as a relevant social category. Therefore, since convicts are a group which has socially relevant consequences, like earning potential and voting privilege, they do constitute a social group.

6. Adjustments to Frye's Definition

Bearing all of this in mind, it seems as though the primary problems with Frye's definition of 'oppression' lie in the simplicity of the benefiting group condition and lack of a morality condition. As it lies in Frye's piece, there must be an oppressor group which enforces the restrictions suffered by the oppressed group- but the oppressor group must benefit from these restrictions. As noted in the cases of gay persons, Arabic people, and slaves, these are significantly restricted groups, and while they meet all of Frye's other criteria, the lack of a beneficiary group entails, by her definition, that they are not oppressed. Therefore, it seems as though it would be most beneficial to drop this condition altogether. There will still be the condition that an

external oppressor group is imposing these boundaries upon the oppressed, but this way it is possible to include legitimately oppressed groups in Frye's definition of oppression.

A second correction which would benefit Frye's definition of oppression would be to include some stipulation as to the moral justifiability of the restrictions faced. A group should not be considered 'oppressed' unless the restrictions faced as a result of social group membership are morally unjustified. Arguably, convicts are justifiably restricted because their crimes caused harm to an individual or society at large; thus, this new condition would remove them from the ranks of the 'oppressed.

As the cageness of the birdcage is a macroscopic phenomenon, the oppressiveness of the situations in which women live our various and different lives is a macroscopic phenomenon. Neither can be seen from a microscopic perspective. But when you look macroscopically you can see it – a network of forces and barriers which are systematically related and which conspire to the immobilization, reduction and molding of women and the lives we live.... From: Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality* (Trumansburg, N.Y.: The Crossing Press, 1983).

Frye's cage image is meant to communicate that these obstacles are systematically arranged so that no escape is possible (or likely, anyway), not matter how great the effort. True, the simple number of obstacles is a barrier, but let's suppose that an oppressed simply decided that s/he was going to work extra hard to overcome them. S/he might then get hit with the criticism that s/he was "too driven" or "had no sense of humor", etc.

Another implication of this way of thinking is that we need to be concerned with the average treatment of people in a group, not with individual exceptions — what I call the "lottery mentality" that sees the one winner and doesn't see all the losers.

In Frye's discussion of what constitutes oppression — whose pain counts as "oppression" — she is trying to distinguish clearly between the oppressed and the oppressor, not letting her point get clouded by people who claim that oppressors are oppressed as well.

Notice that her perspective leaves open the question of integration vs. separation. Even if Hegel's slave rebels against his master, it doesn't follow that the slave wants to live with the master, even if the latter reforms.

7. Faces of Oppression

Gender, race and class: these describe relationships, identities and experiences that are shaped by and reinforcing of conditions of oppression. They also are sources of resistance and hope. Relationships with communities, workers, constituencies and congregations are in a position to turn this into a 'teachable moment,' to encourage a deeper analysis of race, gender and class. a look at Iris Marion Young's framework -- the 'Five Faces of Oppression -- as a way of exploring these intersections.

1. Exploitation. Exploitation has to do with the difference between the wealth that workers create through their labor power and the actual wages that workers get paid. Exploitation is built into the market economy; bosses want to increase profits by lowering wages. The wage and wealth gap between the wealthy owners and managers, on the one hand, and the masses of working people, on the other, is an indication of the degree of exploitation that exists in a society.

2. Marginalization. This refers to being left out of the labor market. Those who are unable to get and keep steady employment – because of disabilities, education levels, age, historic discrimination, lack of jobs in neighborhoods, the conditions of poverty, etc. – are experiencing marginalization.

3. Powerlessness. In this particular context, 'powerlessness' refers to the way in which workers are divided and segmented into jobs with autonomy and authority and jobs with little or no autonomy and authority.

Workers in lower-status jobs experience more powerlessness (both on the job and in the sphere of politics) than workers with professional jobs. At the same time, giving some workers a little bit of autonomy on the job can undermine a sense of solidarity that they might otherwise feel towards all workers.

4. Cultural Dominance. This refers to the way that one group's experiences, cultural expressions and history are defined as superior to all other groups' experiences and histories. It is not necessary for anyone to say: "my group's culture is superior;" it simply has to be treated as universal — representing the best in all of humanity. It is considered 'normal,' which means that all others are either 'strange,' or 'invisible' or both.

5. Violence. Nation's history is full of examples where violence has been used to keep a group 'in its place.' State-sanctioned violence has been used to enforce caste segregation, to keep workers from organizing and to break up strikes. Everyday violence also reminds social groups of what happens when they resist oppressive conditions: Black youths straying into a white neighborhood, gay men harrassed and beaten outside of bars and clubs, women in the military being harrassed and sometimes raped -- these are examples of the brutality of everyday life for so many of us. And the ways in which violent crimes are dealt with often reflects social and cultural biases; crime is 'contained' within neighborhoods that law enforcement has written off.

Each of these five forms of oppression overlaps with the other. Each is related to and reinforced by the many ideological '-isms' and phobias that exist in our society: racism, classism, homophobia and heterosexism, xenophobia and extreme forms of nationalism, ageism, and more.

Most people in society experience one or more of these forms of oppression at some point in their lives. Most, if not all, working people experience exploitation. Racism runs through each of these kinds of oppression, intensifying the experience of exploitation, powerlessness, cultural dominance and everyday violence. Gay men as a group experience cultural dominance and the threat of violence, but they may not necessarily experience other forms of oppression, depending on their class and occupational status. White professional women experience cultural dominance, fear of sexual violence and a degree of powerlessness -- especially if they constantly have to prove themselves worthy of their status. Black professional men also have to constantly prove themselves. Some people experience all five of these kinds of oppression. Their political powerlessness tends to render them invisible.

These five ways of looking at oppression help us see that people cannot be divided neatly into the 'oppressed' and the 'oppressor' columns. We need to build upon people's different as well as shared experiences of oppression to encourage them to get involved in collective action for social change, and to join with others, whose experiences with oppression may look somewhat different from their own.

A structural analysis of oppression that looks at the intersections of race, gender and class allows us to unmask the ways in which these social and economic divisions reflect and reinforce existing power relations in society. It highlights the need for organizational and institutional allies who recognize their shared responsibility to fight oppression in all its forms.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, Frye's definition of 'oppression' is imperfect. There are several examples, explored here, in which legitimately oppressed people do not fit the bill, or people who are clearly not oppressed do. There are two simple fixes, those being the removal of the benefiting group requirement, and the addition of a morality stipulation, would ensure that these problems are corrected. While Frye's definition of 'oppression' can be useful in identifying persons who are oppressed, her criteria need revision to be truly applicable to all situations, not just that of women.

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