

# Shifts of Consciousness for the Anti-Classist Activist

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## 1. Charity is Not Activism

Charity, when not coupled with an insistence on and movement toward systemic change, only reaffirms the power hierarchy. It does not—*can not*—lead to real sociopolitical reform because it fails to challenge existing power structures. Moreover, a benchmark of authentic activism is personal vulnerability. Charity does not make me or my privilege vulnerable. In fact, it allows me to maintain a comfortable distance. Therefore, seeing charity as activism is a demonstration in privilege.

## 2. “Culture of Poverty” or “Culture of Classism”?

Dozens of studies conducted since the early 1970s refutes Oscar Lewis's (and more recently, Ruby Payne's) construction of a “culture of poverty.” The poor Somali immigrants arriving in Minnesota this year are *not* the same culturally as poor families who have lived for generations in Appalachian West Virginia, for instance. And again, focusing on the supposed cultures of oppressed people is an expression of privilege, as it diverts attention from the gross and systemic class inequities (such as inequitable access to high-quality schooling) that pervade the U.S. and the world. It is this culture—the culture of *classism*—that I, as an anti-classist activist, must work to eliminate.

## 3. Capitalism Is Not Democracy

The consciousness of the anti-classist activist refuses binaries and false correlations by challenging most vigorously those notions that are defended most vigorously by the power structure. Chief among these is the unquestioned rightness and fairness of capitalism. Despite the propaganda, there is nothing inherent about capitalism that aligns it with democracy or freedom or justice. But somebody benefits from the notion that these concepts are synonymous. Who might that be? Other notions, systems, and conditions for critical reconsideration: consumer culture, globalization, and corporate welfare.

## 4. The De-demonization of Socialism

It's odd, don't you think, that while everybody seems to agree that a public (meaning *socialist*) education system is an essential part of democracy, a public healthcare system is inherently evil. And again, who exactly benefits from this demonization?

## 5. With Whom Lies the Deficit?

Deficit theorists such as Ruby Payne essentially blame poor people for their poverty by pointing to supposed deficits in their characters, spiritualities, and world views. Deficit theory helps to justify what Herbert Gans calls “the war against the poor”: the process of linking nearly every social ill to people in poverty in order to justify the elimination of social programs and policies meant to help them. If we see the poor as “undeserving,” then we needn’t waste our energies questioning skyrocketing healthcare and housing costs, the dissolution of labor unions, the disproportionate amounts of water and air pollution in high-poverty neighborhoods, or the fact that tens of thousands of people die all over the world each day from preventable poverty-related illnesses. The *real* deficit is a moral one and it lies with people who perpetuate classism, not with those who bear the brunt of that classism.

## 6. The Un-Meritocratic Meritocracy

The ideal of meritocracy assumes a level of equity and social justice that simply doesn’t exist, either in the U.S. or most (if not all) other societies. The education system is a good example. Economically disadvantaged students are much more likely than their wealthier peers to be assigned to schools with an abundance of unlicensed and inexperienced teachers, dilapidated buildings, inadequate educational materials, lower-order thinking curricula, over-crowded classrooms, and high teacher turnover rates. These conditions are wholly unrelated to individual students’ intelligence, ability, motivation, or “merit.” But they have an enormous impact on the quality of education students receive and, as a result, on their future opportunities. We might say we have a *wealthocracy*, wherein access and opportunity are granted on the basis of one’s existing levels of access and opportunity. Where’s the “merit” in that?

## 7. Everything’s an Intersection

One cannot understand classism or poverty, whether locally, nationally, or globally, without understanding its intersectionality with a plethora of other oppressions. In the U.S., for instance, classism is inextricably linked to racism. Slavery, Jim Crow, housing discrimination, Manifest Destiny—these are examples of racism institutionalized for the purpose of economic exploitation. Only about 4% of Fortune 500 CEOs are women. People with disabilities are much more likely to live in poverty than people without disabilities. Much of the undocumented immigration that some people rail against today is at least in part the result of U.S. and European colonization, imperialism, and economic exploitation of Southeast Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, and Africa. So any attempt to study or act against poverty and classism without a deep understanding of these intersections cannot succeed. And I cannot be an authentic anti-classist activist without also being a committed anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-every-kind-of-oppression activist.