

Stages of Anti-Poverty & Anti-Classist Consciousness

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1. “Culture of Poverty” Eradication

We begin with the assumption that poverty is the result of cultural, spiritual, and intellectual deficits among poor people. *If only “those people” weren’t so lazy, criminal-minded, and weak, they, too, could thrive in our meritocracy.* So we strive to eliminate the so-called “culture” or “mindset” of poverty by teaching economically disadvantaged people what we assume to be a superior “culture” or “mindset” of middle class or wealthy people. This stage explicitly protects the capitalist class hierarchy by locating the problem of economic inequality on the shoulders of those oppressed by it. (By the way, research shows very clearly that the “culture of poverty” doesn’t exist.)

2. Conscience-Saving Charitable Giving

We are, in Gwendolyn Brooks’ words, the “lovers of the poor.” (See her poem of this title her book, *Blacks*, for a wonderful illustration of this stage.) *It’s such a pity that those kids won’t be receiving any presents this holiday season.* So we “sponsor” poor families during the winter holidays, buying them blankets and gifts. We donate money, not for the purpose of eliminating classism, but in order to soothe our own consciences.

3. The “Messiah Mentality” or “Savior Syndrome”

We know that people in poverty need more than blankets and a warm meal on Thanksgiving. And we know that poverty is not all “their” fault. *It’s those damn government handouts. Poor folks learn that they can take advantage of the system and all those freebies and decide they don’t need to pull themselves up by their bootstraps.* So we save economically disadvantaged people from themselves by eliminating programs created to help them. Think “welfare reform.”

4. Individual Advocacy

We understand some of the systemic barriers that exist for people in poverty: soaring healthcare and childcare costs, a shortage of living wage jobs, inequities in access to quality education, and so on. We sympathize with individual acquaintances who are struggling to get by, but we’re not quite ready to risk our own class privilege by pushing for systemic change. *I don’t know how Judy does it, paying childcare and rent just by working at the diner. And that deadbeat landlord, letting her apartment deteriorate,...* So we draw on our privilege in smaller ways, helping Judy consider options for legal action against her landlord and going to bat for her when one of her children is assigned unjustly to special education.

5. Anti-Classism

We are committed to eliminating classism. We understand that eliminating classism means eliminating poverty, dismantling systems of power and privilege. It also means thinking critically *and acting* against many of the systems and structures we have been socialized to embrace without question: corporate capitalism, consumer culture, globalization, the myth of meritocracy, and so on. We recognize that individual advocacy is not enough, that real change occurs only when systemic shifts are made and when access and opportunity are distributed equitably on a global level.