

Gradual Change is not Progress

By [Prof Denis Rancourt](#)

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Comfortable First World liberal and left intellectuals claiming to work for change often project the opinion that positive change is best achieved by incremental improvements, gradual progress, dialogue, and negotiations that acknowledge the legitimacy of the other side. They assert that confrontation is 'counter productive'. There is an army of academics, managers, and professionals, who will argue this point quite strenuously. They are the service intellectuals.

Their job is to block any model that would involve people of the disadvantaged side actually demanding change in the structure that keeps them at the bottom. Instead, they promote a dialogue model in which the disadvantaged side enters into loaded and unwinnable negotiations with players that hold all the cards. These negotiations ensure that institutional structures of inequity are reinforced rather than progressively dismantled.

The service intellectuals argue that the only alternative to gradual change via education and dialogue is all out revolution where all the leaders are killed and replaced by tyrants. They propose a binary landscape of change where one must choose between either the gradual evolution that they manage or civil war and its uncertain outcomes. They monitor attempts for change and intervene when the latter attempts are 'too confrontational' or 'too undiplomatic' or 'too aggressive' or 'too radical', implying that those guilty of such crimes risk pushing us towards a bloody carnage. They contrast the restraint that they promote, design and manoeuvre to chaos.

This fallacy is so ingrained in much of the First World middle class that it has become part of our culture. Many of us are allergic to opinions, differences, arguments, political discussions, etc.

The truth is that there is a broad spectrum of possibilities between polite consultation and an armed revolution. The truth is that change requires confrontation. Change requires confrontation because we are not talking about a change in hairstyle; we are talking about changes that redistribute power and relative advantages between different groups and between undemocratically controlled entities (corporations, banks, institutions) and people.

One argument of service intellectuals is that we are all people, that mutual respect must prevail, that those on both sides want what is good for everyone and that both sides only need a chance to see this.

The latter is certainly the right working assumption in interpersonal relations between individuals but what are the two sides in societal and political struggles? The two sides in societal change are: management and workers, corporations and citizens, ruling elite and ordinary people, developers and residents, investors and inhabitants, etc. A manager

representing a corporation cannot be abstracted into the shoes of one's next-door neighbour who wants to talk about repairing a shared fence. The manager wields power over employees and is backed by a corporation with political clout. The situation is highly asymmetric. She may be a good mother to her children and she may be on the boards of a dozen charity organizations but all that is irrelevant. This manager has a job to do and it's not a pretty one. It's about manipulating and exploiting people (workers and consumers) to maximize profits for investors. It's about making sure that those with money get more money, as much as can be extorted. Public pressure and organized resistance are the employee's only chance.

If you don't need to use force, if a polite discussion will do the job, then you are on the same side! You are collaborating. You are in a symbiotic relation. You collaborate with your peers; you fight your exploiters. You love your neighbour; you fight your oppressor. Your heart is the size of your fist.

It's so damn obvious that it's hard to recognize. Union officials that collaborate with employer executives are part of the same management elite. Professions that collaborate are part of the same system of exploitation or of inherited privilege, such as the medical establishment and big pharma. Where there is 'cooperation' there is relative advantage for both parties, relative to other groups. Where there is institutionalized asymmetry and injustice, only confrontation and forced adjustments can partially restore equitable distribution. It doesn't take a Ph.D....

Actually, it does take a Ph.D.: One must be indoctrinated by a sufficient amount of formal education to not see the obvious and to partake in the lie. Gradual change my ass. A true intellectual doesn't preach the religion of gradual change but instead steps out of the mental framework of privilege to defend those on the other side. A true intellectual helps the other side develop the tools it needs and does not participate in neutralizing defiance.

Change occurs when people risk as much as they need to. First World citizens have a responsibility to risk as much as they need to to be as effective as possible. True intellectuals are impolite, unprofessional, uncollegial, inconsiderate, etc., in pushing the limits as far as they must. In the light of the crimes being perpetrated by our governments and our corporations and financial institutions, true intellectuals have no choice. The question is not "What is too far?" but rather "What is far enough?"

Respect for individuals as persons is distinct from attacking representatives of oppressive power structures. The representatives must be attacked as representatives, as strongly as is necessary. They must be attacked as individuals wielding illegitimate (undemocratically controlled) power that is used unjustly. One must assume that they can be intimidated, perturbed, educated, etc., and that our actions will either make them see the light or at least force them to back down. People enmeshed in a system and culture of power and privilege cannot be reasoned with from the other side of the divide without the reasoning being based on a real threat.

Polite discussions and orderly debates are fine between different segments of the ruling class arguing about how best to preserve and enhance their class dominance but social justice comes only out of risk and confrontation, organized resistance and mass movements. True intellectuals speak truth to power [1]. True intellectuals expose power and say the obvious. True intellectuals side with the exploited and oppressed and are examples of defiance.

Service intellectuals maintain a mental environment that preserves privilege. Service intellectuals maintain intellectual discipline – constantly identifying, isolating, and neutralizing true intellectuals, however few there are.

Denis G. Rancourt is Professor of Physics at the University of Ottawa.

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