
Being an Oppressor

by

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Crudely speaking, the population of the world can be divided into two main groups, the oppressed and the oppressors. Applying this measure to myself, I am a reluctant member of the latter, the oppressors. Not because I choose to be, nor because I agree to the philosophical concept which states that it is better to victimise than to be victimised but because I was born into certain circumstances at a certain time.

This is the starting point, the conditions that were imposed on me because of my religion, the colour of my skin and the social class I was brought up in. Three factors, at least two of which can be altered, given the inclination and the freedom of action.

Being an oppressor doesn't necessarily mean you exploit and oppress. You can be an oppressor simply by belonging to an oppressing class and not fighting against it, from within or without. A passive oppression, turning a blind eye on the actions of your compatriots, claiming there isn't much the individual can do, is as bad as being an active oppressor or even worse, since you accept an imposed role just because you can't be bothered or see the point in bothering. I am

beginning to learn ways of opposing oppression, of turning against concepts I was taught not to dispute.

I am Jewish by religion. I don't practise Judaism because I find it irrelevant to the way of life I choose to lead. But most people still regard me as a Jew which puts me on the defensive, since I feel I share something with the Jews of the world but hold many reservations about being a Jew. I share something with the Jews of the world because the Jews, as a group and as individuals, were persecuted in the past because of their identity, and I feel that by ignoring mine I would be betraying them. But I don't like the Jews that have turned into Modern Jews, the Israelis. From being an oppressed minority, the Jews have turned into an oppressing group; oppressing the Palestinians in Israel. I was brought up in Israel and although I object firmly to the current Israeli policies in regard to the Arabs, I know I'm partially to blame because of my being in Israel at the time when the Palestinians were oppressed. I no longer live in Israel which makes me feel worse because sometimes I feel I have run away from my duties. I have escaped from trying to change the reality I didn't like.

There is a conflict in Israel between the people who believe there is a chance for peace through concessions and between those that believe the Israelis will always have to live by the sword. I am a part of that conflict. Part of me wants to end Israel's role as an oppressor by yielding to the Palestinians but another part is afraid that by stopping being the oppressor, Israel might become oppressed, being surrounded by hostile multitudes. I want to stop being an oppressor but fear lest I would become totally oppressed, i.e. eliminated.

In Israel I was considered as a white person. In England I'm being considered as a foreigner but still a white one. I have read and heard, but not witnessed, how the white people have exploited African and Asian communities around the world, and still do. I was a witness, to some extent, to the misery that was caused to the Palestinians in Israel but I never felt it was my fault. I have always expressed my objection and did every active thing I could have done, including refusing an order to go up to the Lebanon while I was in the army, in order to fight. I worked in a restaurant in Tel-Aviv where I met a few Palestinians. We were all dish-washers which helped to bring down the barriers. They were impressed to find a Jew working in a place which was till then the domain of the under-dogs, and I took advantage of their friendliness in order to get to know their views about certain things. We managed to remain friends even though we disagreed on politics. That was my only personal contact with the oppressed, the only time I succeeded in overcoming the

limitations my nationality had set around me. Like most people, I believe that if the people of two rival nations could communicate directly without the intervention of power-seeking governments, peace wouldn't be such a remote notion. But I know that prospects of such an event occurring are almost surely theoretical which makes me think that whatever I do, I will always be regarded as an oppressor even though my sympathies are with the oppressed.

I know I could join the other side and fight against my own people. I wrote "I could" but I don't know how possible it is. I don't think I would do that, unless I felt personally threatened. Some people might call it cowardice and I can see their point. It would mean renouncing my background, my family, burning all the bridges. It all boils down to the fact that that I'm not convinced that such an action could be fruitful to me or to the oppressed. Being unconvinced, teetering between the possibilities might prove to be luxuries I cannot afford, but how can I act without being fully committed? Not wanting to remain passive, I try to calm my conscience by arguing against the oppressors and explore my own inadequacies.

I was also brought up in a middle-class environment but only when I was in my late teens I realised that the relative comfort that my family and I enjoyed came at the expense of the working-class and the population of the under-developed countries. Materialistically, I was conditioned to consume commodities that the actual producers can't enjoy just because I do. I'm trying to do without those commodities but still

wonder what is the difference it makes in world ecology terms. It's a drop in the ocean and I don't like to think that my efforts are in vain.

Being a middle-class deviant, being a reluctant oppressor, means I'm more aware of the factors that operate on me, and that I try to make an effort to react to them. Unlike the active oppressor, I think I'm also aware of the fact that the oppressors themselves are being oppressed by their own limitations, inhibitions and the damage their hatred and exploitation does to their well-being and integrity. Not being able to see yourself as a part, an equal one, of the human race, not realising that your well-being stems from other people's deprivation, is a fault I don't think I suffer from, but most oppressors do.

I suffer from a problem of identity. Not wanting to belong to the oppressors' side but not knowing whether I can genuinely claim to have escaped from it by verbally opposing it, is a conflict that rages within me, most of the time leaving me feeling frustrated and without much hope for future success.

I feel that by being aware of my social status and by not conforming, I have exposed myself to another kind of oppression, not as physically severe as of the blacks in South-Africa for example, but difficult enough for me. I feel oppressed by the people with whom I share a

social class and nationality, by those who see my predicament as phoney and my views as "arm-chair radicalism". They know I belong to the privileged, by choice or not, and cannot understand my refusal to accept those privileges without worrying at whose expense they come.

I'm also in danger of blowing out of any proportion my own difficulties in coming to terms with reality, compared with those people whose daily struggle for elementary things that I take for granted like food, security (if only relative and transitory) and freedom of speech and action, dwarfs my suffering. I don't want to pity the oppressed. I don't want to try to help them from above, but rather change my circumstances so that I will be able to fight from their stand-point. Would that be masochism? Is it possible for me to belong to a group which is neither oppressed nor oppressing, or is this aspiration based on romantic impracticality?

Most of the time though, my worries have been fed on a daily flood of information that reaches me through the media: a vast cloud of oppression of individuals, of groups, of nations which dwarf into insignificance my own endeavours in the opposite direction. But what else can I do except write about my own feelings? Am I a brave small voice? or am I just indulging myself?
