

On the Road with CWS

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This article is a critique. Criticism is a topic and a practice that requires a lot more thought and concern than it generally gets.

All activists, organizers, all people who are interested in social change, we are all critics. Leftism is a tendency of a particular kind of criticism, with a history of a particular kind of action and analysis.

Criticism usually isn't done well. It is easier to say that something is wrong than to say how to do something right.

Usually criticism is an exercise in pointing fingers — you're not doing this right, what is wrong with you for not knowing how to do it better; I would never do it that way — that is more about shaming than it is about really trying to figure out how to do something better, or how to help other people do something better.

Two helpful changes could happen regarding critics of social change tendencies. One is that people who are being critical be concrete and specific about what concerns they have, which actual practices they judge problematic.

The other is that people who are being critiqued become more able to hear the possibilities in critiques (which are always difficult to receive and even more so when any of the parties are defensive).

The question of criticism points both ways. I am critiquing CWS (Challenging White Supremacy workshops), which are critiquing lots of other people. I want to learn how to criticize better. I hope that CWS organizers want to learn that also.

I am trusting that the line on their website, "Constructive criticism is an act of love," is something that we can all take to heart.

Challenging White Supremacy (CWS) workshops are San Francisco based trainings aimed primarily at teaching white people about racism and about how to be responsible anti-racist activists and organizers. The workshops follow a curriculum — including readings on people of color groups, U.S. colonial and neo-colonial history and current events, and resistance to U.S. oppression. The CWS project has in the past couple of years been somewhat collectivized by a group of CWS graduates. CWS workshops explicitly stress taking action- — not just understanding the issue as CWS defines it but acting on that understanding, connecting theory and practice. CWS is the most consistent and reliable organization in the Bay Area for white people who want to do anti-racist and anti-racism work.

White supremacy is one of the defining characteristics of oppression in the U.S. Growing up in a culture that privileges people who are perceived as white makes it impossible not to be racist.

People who benefit from white racism have a particular responsibility to figure out how to challenge white racism. For people creating change in this society, it is essential to understand how white racism has developed in this country, how cultural minority folks have been oppressed (killed, tortured, disappeared) in ways that are different from cultural majority folks. It would be wonderful if a series of workshops could get together a bunch of strangers to do some readings and have some discussions to work through the defensiveness and ignorance that especially white people in the U.S. feel around race. These workshops would appropriately include the outrage of people who have been brutalized by white supremacy. As a long time anti-racist activist and organizer who went through a CWS training many years ago and a refresher a couple years ago (and as someone who has worked with many CWS graduates over the years) I will go that far down the CWS road. What follows are the impassable detours, overpasses and tunnels — as in vision.

U.S. theories around race tend towards over-simplicity, and CWS theory is no exception. For example, much in the way that it is a blindness to talk about Native people, or Asian people, or African people, because those terms assume a similarity that is usually inaccurate, so it is inaccurate to use the term People of Color. Not only are “Peoples of Color” not like each other in significant ways, they are not targeted by white supremacy in the same ways. There is no word or phrase (at least in English) that acknowledges both the similarities and the differences between groups of people (much less individuals) who are oppressed in this culture around skin color, gender, body type, cultural background, language, religion, class; all of which are related to perceptions of race. The existing terms (that we use for lack of better ones) emphasize what the racist system wants emphasized, which is the presumed special character of whiteness.

Similarly, there is no sophisticated understanding in the left about how various cultures interact with each other. “Internalized racism” is the phrase usually forced to cover the different problematic events in the U.S. between individuals and groups not clearly classifiable as “white.”

While all of us have to use the language that enables us to be at least approximately understood, CWS rides these simplifications rather than critiquing, exploring, or deconstructing them. This is unfortunate in a group that is celebrated as being “cutting edge” on the issue of racism.

CWS is part of the left¹ but CWS theory is simplistic even by left standards. Despite the inclusion of the words “class,” “homophobia” and “patriarchy” on the CWS website, the CWS workshops don’t have a class or queer or feminist analysis, much less one that attempts to integrate those.

¹ For a critique of the left from one anarchist’s perspective go to:
pub47.ezboard.c0m

An excerpt: “For the left, the social struggle against exploitation and oppression is essentially a political program to be realized by whatever means are expedient. Such a conception obviously requires a political methodology of struggle, and such a methodology is bound to contradict some basic anarchist principles. First of all, politics as a distinct category of social existence is the separation of the decisions that determine our lives from the execution of those decisions. This separation resides in institutions that make and impose those decisions. It matters little how democratic or consensual those institutions are; the separation and institutionalization inherent in politics always constitute an imposition simply because they require that decisions be made before the circumstances to which they apply arise.”

“Challenging White Supremacy workshop organizers believe that the most effective way to create fundamental social change in the U.S. is by building mass-based, multi-racial grassroots movements led by radical activists of color.”²

As part of the collectivization process, CWS is beginning to try to address this lack — it very recently held its first workshop on gender — but CWS was started and is promoted and successful as a group that does not work on the connections between issues. When I was in my first CWS workshop years ago, the attempt to integrate other analyses was seen as racist, as disregarding the primacy of racism, as a distraction from our complicity in the racist system.

The principles that CWS holds for creating an “anti-racist agenda” are:

1. Act on your principles;
2. Create a culture of resistance;
3. Stand in solidarity;
4. Prioritize the issues of people of color;
5. Respect the leadership of people of color;
6. Hold on to your visions.

While the first and last of these refer people back to their own perspectives and their own lives, the entire workshop is based on *challenging* white people’s understandings of their own lives and perspectives. While white CWS participants may be fed the line that they know what’s right and have appropriate visions, much more emphasis is put on telling them that their whole lives they have benefited from oppressive systems and that their perceptions are based on these benefits, and most significantly that CWS will show them how to behave. How then are they supposed to trust their perceptions enough to base future actions on them? CWS may intend to empower people to act ethically in the situations that they find themselves in, but it actually acts as a promoter of rules.

The problem with rules is that people follow them rather than thinking for themselves, and once they get into a situation where the rules don’t work, they’re lost. For example, given two political groups of color with conflicting goals and/or tactics, what is the good CWS graduate to do? How does she decide which is best? If she decides based on her own understanding, how does she know that she isn’t really basing her decision on what is most comfortable for her as a white person? Another example: Is a light-skinned or mixed-race person’s understanding of racism less valid than the understanding of someone with darker skin?

Arguably the biggest problem with CWS is the least quantifiable and has to do with an attitude that I can best describe as moralistic. I have felt this sense of moral superiority by CWS folks, and, unsolicited, other people have talked to me about feeling it also; an attitude from CWS participants that their work is more important than other (white) people’s work, that if you’re not working in a project that conforms to CWS standards then you are part of The Problem, that CWS participants are the only (white) people who are really working on their own racism (this attitude is even more apparent with CWS trainers). CWS workshops do not encourage people

² All quotes are from the CWS web site.

to talk about the mixed feelings and controversial beliefs they have; these workshops encourage people to accept, incorporate, and proselytize the CWS agenda. In the CWS refresher that I took, the CWS folks gave out a series of definitions that were the ones we were to use, the definitions that were Right regardless of how useful they were in discussing these topics with other people or in understanding the topics for ourselves. When we struggle with the basic oppressions in our culture, there is a difficult and necessary balance between consciousness raising (which can become insular and introspective to a fault) and following experts (facilitators who bestow The Answers upon the participants). Working with people who have gone through CWS usually means listening to a lot of righteous talking and not a lot of concrete suggestions.

In my history of different organizing efforts (working in coalition on long term projects and one-time events of various sorts as well as while creating longstanding groups) there have been two directions of thought regarding how to organize in an anti-racist way. The first direction is that people of color and white people should all be working together. The second way, promoted in the sixties, is that white people should be organizing and educating themselves and their own communities (presumably of mostly white people) and people of color should be doing the same – and should not be forced to deal with the ignorance and bigotry of white people (however well-intentioned). In the past 10 or 15 years, the integration argument has become more popular again, with the added condition of making sure that people of color are in positions of leadership and are not tokenized. There are both good and bad things about both routes, making it impossible to have clarity about which is best in a given situation without conversations that include some amount of trust that everyone in the room is actually interested in finding the best solution. CWS graduates have learned to trust other CWS graduates (due to the bonds that are formed by spending time talking about controversial issues, and by sharing a jargon) and have learned to be suspicious of white people who are not CWS graduates, which makes constructive flexible conversations more difficult.

“Anti-racist education should be required and permanent for all white folks who call themselves ‘social justice activists.’” Of course all people who desire fundamental social change should continually be learning and checking ourselves and our colleagues around issues of practice and theory, and this should be happening around all of the different ways that people are privileged or un-privileged. But the language of “education,” and more importantly how CWS practices this “education,” is as experts, as authorities, as those-who-know and who will show everyone else The Way. Obviously some people do know more than other people; I am not denying that training and experience are important. The hard-to-quantify point I am making is that it is one thing to explore with people places that you have been to before, it is another to deliver them to the chosen location. To be fair to CWS, “race” is such a loaded concept – especially in political circles – that white people tend to come to anti-racist education projects with the desire to be delivered.

By refusing to acknowledge the complexities around power and around how people learn to survive within oppressive societies, CWS acts to objectify the people it is trying to respect. By making skin color the most important thing about a person, and making simplistic assumptions about how people exist in a state of not-whiteness, CWS reifies race.

People learn how to make the best of completely fucked-up situations. Some people of color have learned to use racism in the same way that some women have learned to use sexism (and so on). One obvious example of someone using this kind of manipulation is Clarence Thomas, the very conservative, then-candidate for the Supreme Court who was accused by his black staff member (Anita Hill) of sexual assault. Thomas referred to the hugely publicized review of his

actions by an all-white, all-male panel as a “high tech lynching.” And of course, now he is a Supreme Court justice. His use of his race was conscious and entirely strategic.

Abiding by CWS theory makes it impossible for any pale skinned person (regardless of ethnicity, etc) to challenge any dark skinned person around racism, or frequently around anything else (sexism, classism, etc.). This assumption of ultimate authority based on skin color acts to further distance people from each other, making it more difficult — rather than less — to build the kind of relationships with each other that more deeply and consistently challenge racist assumptions and acceptance of privilege. “If the core group is predominantly white, it should work to develop relationships of strategic collaborations or alliances with organizers of color. *Ideally*, these organizers of color would have a strong interest in seeing that the constituency being organized by the anti-racist core group creates a consistent, long term anti-racist agenda.” [Italics added] Presumably if white or mostly white groups cannot find people of color to lend credibility to a project, then the project shouldn’t happen. This encourages a kind of tokenism that is the last thing that anti-racist people actually want. It is true that white people have a lot to learn about racism that they can’t learn from each other. It is true that society is segregated so that building working political relationships, or making friends, with people who are different from us (in various ways) takes some conscious thought and action. But arguably it is more anti-racist to take a class, or go to lunch with a co-worker, than to search out an activist of color or two to lend “face” to a political project.

Some of people’s embrace of the CWS project is due to a lack of other options. Conscious white people want to be anti-racist, although frequently the sincere desire to learn more appropriate ways of understanding others and ourselves is subsumed by guilt or the fear of being bad or wrong or attack-able. This makes the quest more about getting approval than about having real relationships and actually challenging anything. A revealing comment by the CWS founder: “When I challenge white supremacy, both my own white privilege and the oppression of people of color, I am healing myself — of my fears, of self-doubt, of *the guilt that comes from being who I am*: a white person of conscience in a white supremacist society.” [Italics added] This endearingly vulnerable statement is a celebration of her guilt; she sees guilt as a sign of her conscience rather than as a sign of her misguided identification with corporate media, the military, the government, big business — the institutions that do the vast majority of actually enforcing white supremacy. (Although obviously individuals do also enforce white skin privilege, the impact is qualitatively different.) Her statement is an example of a significant failure in the culture and theory of CWS; the culture and theory that encourage white participants to both self-aggrandize (by acting like they have more influence in the society than they do) and to martyr themselves.

Vine DeLoria Jr. in his book, *Custer Died for Your Sins*, talks about workshop Indians and workshop anthropologists in a chapter that reminded me intriguingly of CWS (and other challenging racism workshops I have taken).

The strongest thing I got from this essay is the reminder that we are in the world. None of us is an abstraction; all of us are working on and creating and changing from and dealing with all the ways that we are oppressed and oppressive. Workshop anthros create workshop Indians, who create workshop anthros who create... Another way of putting this is that there is no way to come at the issue of racism, of power, without affecting it. That I can even write that sentence — where the language implies that possibility — is a problem. I have heard people say things like this for years, and I have said it myself in various ways, but it is a hard epiphany to hold onto.

Epiphanies are not for holding onto, I suppose. I suggest you read the book. Or find your own inspiring books to read.

What are some other options? Getting together in small groups of friends and talking about issues and experiences with people you know and trust, and who you trust to challenge each other conscientiously. Using the challenges and insight from those groups in the work you do in the world. Making friends with and listening to people whose experiences are different from yours (if they're interested, obviously) but without making them Experts. Going outside of activist circles to find inspiration and critique.

Interestingly, after I finished most of this article I was introduced to a body of thought called Critical Race Theory (developed mostly by lawyers who are critical of the law) that raises many of the complexities around race that CWS doesn't. These theorists are thinking about race in sophisticated ways that address people's experiences and they are specifically confronting liberal thought about, for example, the law's neutrality, race as a social construct, the significance of storytelling, racism as aberration vs. racism as business-as-usual, etc. They are also explicitly interested in taking action, even if the action they're considering tends to be reformist rather than re-structural. (I recommend *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, by Jean Stefancic and Richard Delgado.) These are changes that CWS could incorporate. Unfortunately, right now CWS exists more as a stamp of leftist approval on a white person's activism, to show that s/he is taking racism seriously, than it does to challenge the foundational concepts or relationships of racism.

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