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## Building or Burning: Critical Reflections on Social and Political Change

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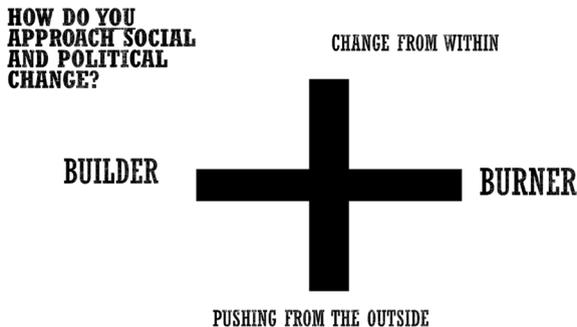
## Building or Burning: Critical Reflections on Social and Political Change

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Social change oriented toward social justice is a core tenet for social work practice. However, there are times that our profession espouses a commitment to social change and yet struggles to actualize it within research, teaching, and practice. In an effort to support social workers taking social action, we put forward the Equiticity Racial Justice Movement framework as a tool for individual or collective discernment about approaches to social change (<https://www.equiticity.org/>).



The Equiticity framework asks: How do you approach social and political change? Its horizontal axis asks participants to consider: When it comes to social change work, do you tend to be a builder or a burner? The vertical axis asks: Do you tend to gravitate toward working for change inside or outside of organizations? Thus, in this thinking exercise, respondents might favor building alternative and just structures, policies, and programs or “burning” down oppressive ones, and they might favor doing so by creating change from within oppressive organizations or by pushing on them from the outside.

After respondents grapple with their answers, they will likely discover that their approach changes, sometimes based upon their socio-political context or life circumstances. Follow-up questions can probe participants to think deeply about why and how their answers change.

- Does your perception of power or powerlessness influence your answers?
- What about opportunities and constraints relating to your employment, income, or reputation?
- Might the scale of necessary change influence your answer?
- To what degree are you comfortable with collaboration or conflict?
- Do you answer one way when facing a crisis and another for long-term change?
- What fears do you have relating to each approach?

If the participants are social workers, a facilitator might ask where the profession fits in each of these categories, and why. They might also ask how the COVID-19 pandemic, highly visible racial injustices, or other social-political shifts influence their answers.

In what follows, we model this reflective exercise by describing elements of our own theory and practice as they relate to social change. As four US-based social work faculty members whose research, teaching, and practice relate to community and political change, we consider how the COVID-19 pandemic and our particular socio-political contexts influenced our answers. It is our hope that this framework can be integrated in social work classes and community groups in a way that reveals new strategies, applications, and possibilities for individual and collective social action.

### **“Civil” Engineering: Critical Foundation for Bridge-building Infrastructure**

Pandemic. Misinformation. Injustice. Incivility. These four large and confounding forces converged 3 years ago, about 1 month after I (Amy M. N.) was selected to Chair a local Task Force on Homelessness. It seemed everything I learned about community-building in over 2 decades as a social worker became “virtually” irrelevant. Yes, *virtually*—as in online, we began to build-bridges on a deeply contentious community issue. Yet it was not only the online format that was a new and challenging experience, it was also the increasing amounts of misinformation, eroding trust in public institutions—across the political continuum, and, seemingly comfortable embrace of incivility. Individuals and newly forming coalitions rallying for minimal or no COVID-19 public health protections begin targeting local policy issues associated with evidence, science, and specialized knowledge. Local elected officials, public health employees, and even community members associated with the local municipality also became targets. Most of my community-building work occurred in the Midwest, but I also have been involved with efforts from coast to coast, in rural, small town, and large urban centers—and I never had an experience like the one during the pandemic. It was the first time I was escorted from a town hall meeting “for my own safety” (pausing to acknowledge the privilege of only recently having this experience). Build-bridges. Meet one-on-one. Get people in the same room. Meet in small groups. Host a town hall. Grab coffee or tea. Break bread. Everything I knew to start building a bridge was unavailable in the first several months of the task force.

It has been over a year now since the task force completed its work and submitted its recommendations; however, I am still reflecting on the process and experience. Some of the emerging insights I am integrating include a deeper commitment to reach out and build a bridge of support when I see social workers or allied colleagues being targeted in social or traditional media and to immediately challenge misinformation where, in the past, I may have intentionally let outlandish and conspiratorial claims go unaddressed. My social action orientation remains rooted in cultivating civility, encouraging civic engagement, and bridge-building and though I always thought there was a place for bridge-burning—I find myself considering those boundaries with even more frequency in the current climate. As we consider where social workers may have the opportunity to build-bridges, we must also acknowledge the need for ethical boundaries especially when some of our neighbors encounter toxic or violent interactions. Bernice King, daughter of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., has said, “It is divisive to call for unity without working for justice. It is uncivilized to ask for civility while prospering from and perpetuating systemic violence. ‘True peace,’ my father said, ‘is not merely the absence of tension, it is the presence of justice.’” Bernice King continues, “Kindness matters. But kindness does not=justice. Unity Matters. But unity is often about maintaining an unjust status quo. Civility matters. But pleas for civility without justice work yield false peace. We need true peace, which includes justice. Let’s unite for that.” So as I remain committed to long-term bridge-building work into the future, I am also committed to actively challenging and working to dismantle oppressive and violent systems.

### **Building or Burning—Who Gets to Decide?**

While I (Karen) am trained in and work across the macro methods of our profession, I want to highlight the saliency of my identity as a community practitioner. I recognize that my personal orientation very much aligns with conflict-based organizing; I seek revolutionary change that typically requires “burning down” existing social structures from the outside. With that said, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the tumultuous social context that surrounded it taught me several valuable lessons as a social work educator and scholar. Above all, the chaos, lack of government leadership during COVID’s initial emergence, and the inability of global public health leaders to successfully intervene to save lives, was quite humbling.

As we all spiraled into chaos, panic, and mass devastation, I was also enlightened with newfound hope. Living in the Chicago area at this time, I witnessed local leaders of various marginalized groups lead with both familiar and creative interventions. I witnessed the mutual aid networks that disability and trans-activists had long relied on become just as necessary for mainstream society as these groups quadrupled in size. I witnessed abolitionist organizers creatively transform traditional forms of occupation into car protests that strategically created traffic to draw attention to the long-neglected rights of Black and Latinx people, while still protecting the health and safety of protesters. Perhaps forced to sit with complex social tensions due to disruption of daily life, I also witnessed a deepening of critical consciousness as people became more reflective about systemic oppression and our collective wellbeing; such insight in response to the police murder of George Floyd provided unanticipated momentum to the Movement

for Black Lives. These dramatic shifts were just as unpredictable and unprecedented as the pandemic itself, and this experience has since left me thinking about the implications for novel and pragmatic approaches to transformative policy change, and my role in this work.

So, in reflecting on whether I lean into building bridges or systemic deconstruction, my experience with the early days of the pandemic reminds me that it does not really matter. Fundamentally, I believe that the greatest potential for radical, transformative policy change is rooted in the indigenous knowledge and experiences of marginalized communities. Thus, rather than reify formalized power as a policy expert or academic scholar, I hope to use my research skills and formal credibility to better understand and amplify the innovative policy solutions and pragmatic change strategies recommended by people most impacted by systemic oppression.

## Transitioning from Bridging to Burning

Throughout the span of my 25-year career as a community organizer and academic, my framework for social change has been a balance (although at times not as even as I would like) between building the capacity for change by engaging the stakeholders most impacted by the issue in partnerships and leveraging these relationships to target organizations and institutions to eliminate oppressive practices and policies.

I (Jan) am currently an administrator at my university, and my transition into the role from a faculty member started a month before the university closed and we shifted to virtual learning because of COVID-19. I remember this as a period of great uncertainty and a feeling that we were “building the plane as we flew it.” During this time, I viewed our college through a community organizing lens, and my role was to build and strengthen our internal capacity to work together while facing the reality of working in an institution that is part of a state system of higher education that would not mandate masks or vaccinations on campus. Our state emphasized the importance of returning to in-person instruction, even though COVID-19 rates continued to rise. These were significant constraints that contributed to low morale among our faculty and a sense of distrust of the system because of the perception that faculty concerns were not a priority. Much of my time was spent as a mediator between the protocols from upper administration and our faculty and students. I also worked to bridge the gap between those who were privileged and able to successfully navigate the shift to remote learning (they had laptops, fast internet, and the ability to shelter in place while working) compared to many of our first-generation students who did not have the same privileges and were struggling to balance work and school while at increased risk for COVID-19 because they were essential workers. The pandemic highlighted the precarious situation of many of our students who, while they were in college to break generational wealth curses, were close to falling through the cracks of university life. This is not unique to my institution, but it represents broader issues associated with privilege and inequality in higher education. It also reminded me the importance of us not turning a blind eye to the oppressive practice within our institutions and only looking outward to injustice and inequity.

As I reflect on this period, I appreciate my training as a macro social worker because it prepared me for leadership roles that were not part of my new position. This was the first time in my career that a lightbulb went off in my head that I needed to view my institution as a community to adapt and respond to what felt like a never-ending transition period. Now that it has been almost 3 years since the start of the pandemic, the civil unrest in response to the death of George Floyd and other Black and Brown people unfairly detained and killed by police, the sweeping promises of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) initiatives, and navigating continued injustices, it is now time for me to shift the balance to from building to using burning approaches to eliminate oppressive practices in institutions that negatively impact faculty, students, and faculty by creating barriers to access that were amplified during the pandemic.

### Slowing Down and Shifting My Gaze from Outside to Inside

My approach to social change stems from 6 years of practice experience as a community organizer and more than 10 years as a community-engaged scholar. I (Amy K.) am a white cisgender woman, and most of my social change work has taken place in multiracial, multiethnic neighborhoods in the midwest on place-based issues relating to policing, environmental justice, and health inequities. My training as an organizer taught me that solutions to social issues must be driven by people who are most impacted by unjust systems—yet their lack of social and political power often prevents change. Thus, the majority of my work has centered on collectively *building* influential groups and organizations composed of marginalized groups who then push organizations and institutions (e.g., the EPA or a state legislature) to create or implement socially just policies and practices. This building work takes place within a larger, long-term context of *burning* in that it aims to replace unjust and exclusionary decision-making processes with democratic, locally accountable ones.

My outsider approach to social change shifted in 2020. That year, I gave birth to my son—a blessing in my life, for sure—but one that included a socially distanced pregnancy and time as a new mother. Many of the informal supports that help new parents to be healthy caregivers—being in community with friends and family or meeting other caregivers at the playground or library—were not possible, and because the U.S. was still months away from approving vaccines, my partner and I returned to our increasingly demanding jobs without access to safe childcare. I realize there is privilege embedded in my statement, in part because many were and still are struggling due to a lack of safe, reliable work. Still, the effects of the pandemic on working mothers, and within higher education specifically, were deeply challenging and isolating.

This mix of increasingly visible social inequities, coupled with my personal (though always political) struggles, broadened my approach to social change work beyond an “outsider” orientation. I began to think and engage more seriously with my complicity in oppressive systems as a professor of social work in a private, predominately white institution.

I am now discerning and experimenting with ways to navigate and resist these systems, while being a part of them. For me, this requires a more explicit recognition of how neoliberal logics (e.g., a reverence for overwork, “success” quantified through metrics, competition for private funding, and overall speeding up in the workplace) produce gendered and racialized impacts, especially among caretakers. I still believe that we must collectively push and even “burn down” institutions, policies, practices, and logics that reproduce sexist and exclusionary policies. Yet we must also do the necessarily *slow* work of recognizing these dynamics, imagining and building alternative practices, and prioritizing care, mutual aid, and holistic wellbeing.

### Insights Gained and Key Reflections

The goal of this commentary is to humbly offer some critical reflections about social change work—its potential, its limitations, and the real costs that can be associated with doing so. We do so while recognizing that social injustice is not only needed “out there” but in our own workplaces, neighborhoods, and communities. We are thus embedded within complicated systems, and reflecting on ways to be accountable to the values we profess as individuals and as social workers. The work of critical reflection can feel vulnerable, especially in an environment that includes extremist beliefs that result in the targeting of educators or censoring of teaching material. Yet we propose that critical reflection is a necessary part of social change work, particularly following a series of crises that required many of us to “build the plane as we fly it.” We hope that this tool can help readers to slow down, reflect on their beliefs and behaviors, and then (re)commit to the hard work of building and bridging toward social justice.

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Amy Krings is a board member of Influencing Social Policy (ISP) and the Association for Community Organization and Social Action (ACOSA) and Jan Ivery is a board member of the Association for Community Organization and Social Action (ACOSA).

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