

POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS: A PERPETUAL QUEST

Valerie Miller, May 31, 2002

What does a person from the United States have to say of value to colleagues in Pakistan about political consciousness? I am not entirely sure. But let me try by starting with my own initial struggles with consciousness and move to some of the lessons and questions gathered from friends and colleagues around the world.

I first got into a fight with political consciousness as a summer student in Mexico - not really understanding what it was, but feeling its consequences like an earthquake shake me to the core. For me at that time, the United States was a paragon of democracy, equality and human rights -- principles I passionately affirmed. So when my Mexican history professor told us that the US had backed a coup against Guatemala's democracy in 1954, I stood up in class and told him he was wrong. Profoundly disturbed, when I returned to my university, I spent weeks researching the case, only to find out he was right and I was wrong. That discovery led me to a life of constant questions and a career dedicated to advocacy and education on issues of peace, social justice and development.

Disturbing Trends: Current interpretations of advocacy, however, have made me grapple again with this thing called political consciousness. Let me explain. What colleagues and I have seen in our work is quite troubling especially for those of us concerned about making relations of power more equitable. In the last decade advocacy has increasingly been seen as a new panacea for problems of government corruption. It has been promoted by Northern agencies, often well-intentioned, but with a narrow technical focus on elite lobbying that is relatively devoid of any deeper power analysis or vision of empowerment. Disadvantaged populations are seen as groups to be mobilized on behalf of policy change but not as real partners or decisionmakers. The importance of strengthening the clout, leadership and voices of marginalized peoples is not recognized as being an integral part of advocacy. As a result, advocacy essentially becomes depoliticized and delinked from building social movements or transforming NGO beneficiaries into active citizens and real agents of change - vital elements of democratic governance.

Dimensions of Power : In such circumstances, power and strategy are viewed rather one dimensionally. Lobbying and monitoring the visible institutions of authority such as government or corporations are seen as the answer. Yet these same forces work at an invisible level to exclude marginalized groups from public decisionmaking by labeling their leaders as troublemakers or dismissing their grievances, such as domestic abuse or peasant land rights, as illegitimate. Without education campaigns, research, and grassroots constituency building to gain legitimacy and clout, these voices and issues are denied an actual place at the table. However, another form of power operates even more insidiously on consciousness shaping how people see themselves -- socializing certain groups into subordinate roles and others into superior roles. Increasingly social justice groups point out that these attitudes and beliefs are at the core of inequity, violence and fanaticism.

My colleague, Lisa VeneKlasen, and I explore these different dynamics in a book - *A New Weave of Power, People and Politics: An Action Guide for Advocacy and Political Participation*

- that highlights the experiences and voices of advocates from around the world. The book points out that, besides resistance, "Poverty, discrimination, and adversity can breed paralysis and resignation. They can also generate frustration and anger that can fester to shape hostility and hopelessness. This is reinforced by the tendency of society to "blame the victim" and the "victim" to internalize social prejudices. For example, many landless peasants believe they are poor due to their ignorance. Other people see them as undisciplined and lazy. In reality, most peasants work long hours for extremely low wages. Similarly, in many countries, women do not seek legal redress when raped because they are ashamed. Society and the legal system reinforce this shame by insisting, "she must have asked for it." What appears to be acquiescence may be the only option that people have to resist the psychological consequences of subordination. What does it take to help people recognize, understand, and act to address the injustice in their own lives? ...many different competencies are needed, but a core competency has to do with political consciousness."

Political Consciousness: We define political consciousness as a way of seeing, caring about and acting in the world. It is guided by a commitment to human rights and justice and an understanding of power and inequity in social, political and economic systems, relations and values. We look at the roots of the term political or politics to distinguish the term from negative interpretations often associated with it. Derived from the Greek word 'polis' which meant city-state; politics had to do with the life of the community. For us, the challenge of politics and political consciousness, therefore, involves caring about community and seeking the common good. It is about hating injustice and the systems and structures that perpetuate it, but not hating people. It is the art of respecting and working with one another, seeing the 'other' as a fellow human being -- shaped by social forces both perverse and praiseworthy, joined in a common quest and struggle for dignity.

Grounded in critical thinking and values of solidarity and human rights, political consciousness is a lifelong exploration of who we are, how we have been shaped, and how our values, world view, and actions can contribute to a better world for all. It is a journey filled with conflict and growth that can be both liberating and painful. Latin American colleagues working on gender describe it as an interactive and iterative process that involves four overlapping levels of consciousness. These range from passive (accepting roles of subordination as natural) to questioning (asking why) to analytical (naming and analyzing oppressive situations) and finally to active-critical consciousness (developing a critical analysis of inequitable systems and structures and taking action with others to transform them) .

For social justice advocacy, "Political consciousness is both a tool and an objective.... As a tool, political consciousness motivates critical analysis of power dynamics on many levels. As an objective, developing political consciousness provides the basis for the kind of sustained and informed citizen participation necessary to hold powerful interests accountable. Becoming politically aware can help unravel the self-doubt fostered by subordination and discrimination and enable people to recognize their individual power and link with others to address common problems. " It is what the Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, often called critical consciousness and similar to what others call social consciousness but with a greater emphasis on understanding power relations.

Political consciousness not only involves questioning current power dynamics and demagoguery but also building new forms of more inclusive and transformative power that improve human life and forge bridges of cooperation across cultural, racial, ethnic and religious differences. Categories from gender analysis have helped us think beyond the traditional negative and coercive views of power over other people to explore more collaborative ways of understanding and exercising power. Three alternatives offer possibilities for creating more equitable relationships. Power with involves finding common ground and building collective strength with others. Power to refers to the unique potential of people to shape their life and transform the world into a better place. Power within has to do with an individual's sense of worth, hope and self-knowledge and ability to respect and engage with others in the common search for human dignity and fulfillment.

An important part of work on consciousness, especially with seriously marginalized groups, involves helping people develop a sense of their own rights -- understanding that for centuries people have fought to get issues of respect, dignity, and economic justice put into community rules and, more recently, into international and national laws. As a result of these agreements, society and governments are supposed to treat people with certain standards of fairness. To make these rights real, however, it's also important for people to understand that they must continue to challenge power that subordinates and undermines those rights.

Empowering Strategies: How to promote political consciousness? There are a variety of empowering learning and action strategies, sometimes called popular education, that help people ask critical questions, discover new truths, and affirm collaborative values while solving real life problems. " Paulo Freire spoke about popular education as a participatory process of action-reflection-action. While popular education has spawned a myriad of participatory learning methods, the basic process always involves problem identification, analysis, and the pursuit of solutions through dialogue, self-awareness and organizing....Over the last 25 years, activists have built on Freire's approaches and developed methods that assist people in analyzing their own problems through participatory research [and what is called participatory learning and action]....For example, communities concerned about poverty begin by mapping the individual and collective resources in their surroundings. They then construct matrices that help analyze the data and use it in decisions about expanding community economic projects or creating new ones." Other methods involve sharing personal stories -- analyzing life histories and community experiences -- to build bonds between people and develop critical thinking and action skills.

In our advocacy work, we incorporate empowering strategies into the entire development and implementation process from strategic planning to action and evaluation. Starting by developing a common vision of a just society, people examine their own histories and then move to a careful analysis of their own country context and circumstances as a way to better identify and analyze the specific problems they plan to address . By using participatory methods and involving the people most affected by problems, the process becomes one of political education, citizenship, organizing, and consciousness-raising.

The late Mahbub-ul-Haq, respected Pakistani founder of the UNDP Human Development Reports, raised concerns several years ago about how people think and act politically -- concerns that are ever more urgent today in the face of possible war . He asked the question - how can we

build a more compassionate society? In so doing, he expands the challenge and understanding of political consciousness.

"...building a compassionate society is not a technocratic exercise. It requires solid ethical and moral foundations. It requires entirely a new way of thinking of ourselves as a human family, not just a collection of nation states. It requires a new concept of human security which is founded on human dignity, not on weapons of war.

In the last analysis, human security means a child who did not die, a disease that did not spread, an ethnic tension that did not explode, a dissident who was not silenced, a human spirit that was not crushed. And the imperatives of this human security have become universal, indivisible and truly global today.

The choice before is simple, though stark. We can either learn to live together, or we can all die together.

Robert Frost summed up the challenge before us when he said:

*Two roads diverged in the wood and I -
I took the one less traveled by
And that has made all the difference.*

I hope that we show the courage and the wisdom to take the road 'less traveled by' as we build up a more compassionate society in the next century."

As violence and hatred spread across our planet, I find great inspiration in such words. I also find hope in the gestures and consciousness of people who, in the face of their loss, turn pain and anger into a search for deeper human connection. One story that links my country to yours touches me deeply. In the aftermath of Danny Pearl's killing, his wife and family have started a foundation focused on building dialogue between people of different cultures and beliefs through music and journalism -- passions that were at the heart of Danny's life. I share this with you because, if we are to build compassionate and just societies, I think we need to create a tapestry of such stories from around the world to inspire and challenge our collective consciousness and actions.