



The Ruling Class and the Buffer Zone¹

by Paul Kivel

OVER THE YEARS THE RULING CLASS has created a series of jobs and occupations for people who will help them maintain their power and wealth. We refer to this as a buffer zone because it acts as a buffer between those at the top of the pyramid and those at the bottom. The buffer zone is not an economic position indicating income or wealth; it is a role that some people perform through their work that helps the system run smoothly and without change. The function of the buffer zone is threefold.

Taking Care of People

There is so much concentration of wealth by the ruling class that there is not enough to go around for the rest of the population, especially those who are poorest. Millions are hungry, homeless, without health care, decent jobs, or opportunities for education. Every year hundreds of thousands of people die from the effects of poverty, racism, sexism, and homophobia. If these people died in the streets, there would be constant mass uprisings.

If most people receive minimal levels of care and those who die do so in hospitals, at home, in rest homes, or in prisons, it is less likely that people will add up the total impact of the concentration of wealth. So there are many jobs for people to take care of those at the bottom of the pyramid: nurses, attendants, social workers, teachers, youth workers, child care workers, counselors—poorly paid jobs that are primarily done by women and that provide minimal services to those in need.

Taking care of those in need is valuable and honorable work, and most people do it with generosity and good intentions. But in our society, it is also unsupported, low-paid, exploitative work. It serves to mask the inadequate distribution of jobs, food, and housing, and to hide the full impact of the concentration of wealth.

Besides those who work in nonprofits and government jobs to help those in need, a tremendous number of people voluntarily serve in

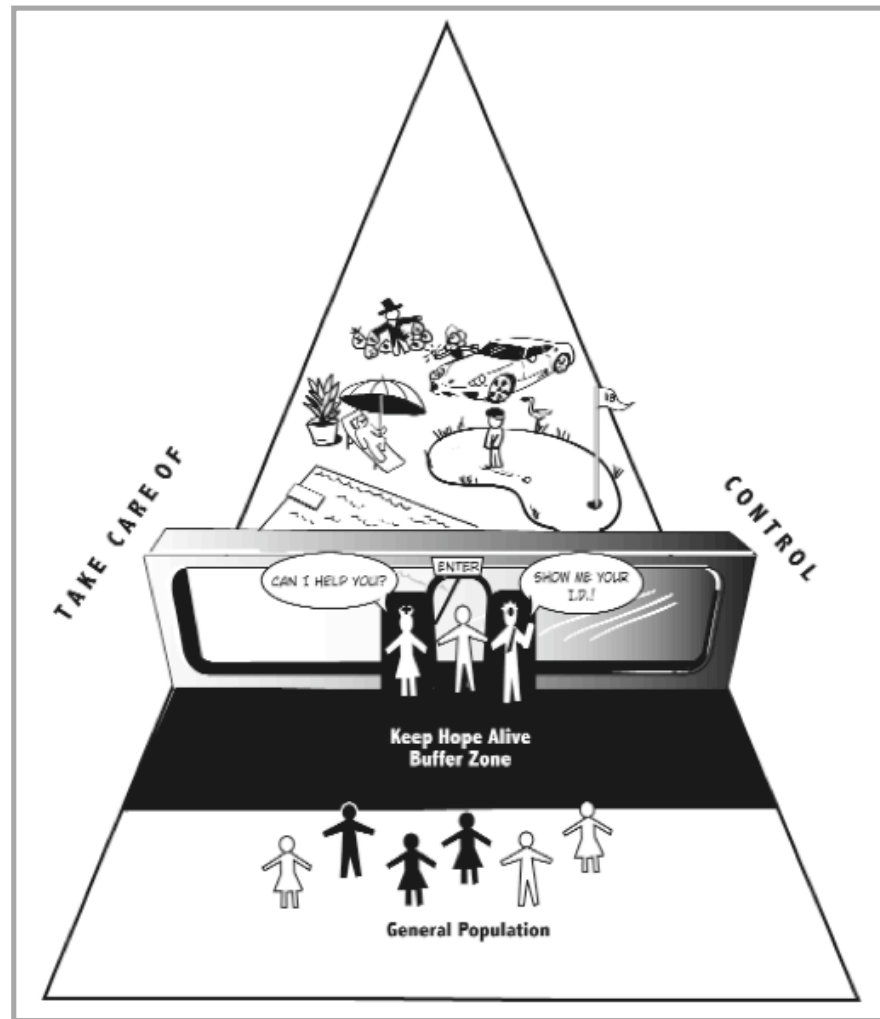
¹ Reprinted from *You Call This a Democracy? Who Benefits, Who Pays and Who Really Decides*.



food and shelter programs, visit the sick, tutor the less educated, and comfort the needy. Such individual efforts are important for sustaining the fabric of our community life. But when temporary shelter becomes a substitute for permanent housing, emergency food a substitute for a decent job, tutoring a substitute for adequate public schools, and free clinics a substitute for universal health care, we have shifted our attention from the redistribution of wealth to the temporary provision of social services to keep people alive.

As sociologist Janet Poppendieck comments in her study of the emergency food system:

... this massive charitable endeavor serves to relieve pressure for more fundamental solutions. It works pervasively on the cultural level by serving as a sort of 'moral safety valve'; it reduces the discomfort evoked by visible destitution in our midst by creating the illusion of



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effective action and offering us myriad ways of participating in it. It creates a culture of charity that normalizes destitution and legitimates personal generosity as a response to major social and economic dislocation. It works at the political level as well, by making it easier for government to shed its responsibility for the poor ... it makes private programs appear cheaper and more cost effective than their public counterparts ... and their [food programs'] maintenance absorbs the attention and energy of many of the people most concerned about the poor, distracting them from the larger issues of distributional politics.²

Keeping Hope Alive

In addition to (barely) surviving, people must have some hope that their (or their children's) situation will get better, or they will have nothing to lose in challenging the power structure. Another role of people in the buffer zone is to keep hope alive by distributing opportunities for a few people to gain access to jobs, housing, health care, or educational opportunities so that it seems like there is opportunity for all.

Many people in the buffer zone are in jobs where they decide who gains access to the meager benefits available. These "success" stories are widely publicized (and used to justify further funding) and anyone who doesn't succeed is judged to be deficient and unworthy of assistance. Students are told that if they stay in school and work hard they will get ahead. Workers are told that if they follow the rules and work hard they will get ahead. Ordinary people are told that if they follow the rules and work hard they will be successful.

Working hard usually does make a difference in one's life. But it makes a crucial difference where one starts and what educational, cultural, social, political, and economic resources a person has available to them. Most people cannot get very far just by working hard. And in the last 30 years, many people who have worked very hard indeed have actually seen their income and quality of life decrease.

With so much wealth and opportunity held by the owning classes there is very little left for those at the bottom of the pyramid to fight over. But people only continue to fight to get ahead if they believe they have a chance. Thus the need for people in the buffer zone to dole out opportunities to move up the ladder. These

² Poppendieck, Janet. *Sweet Charity?: Emergency Food and the End of Entitlement*. New York: Penguin, 1998, 5-6.



opportunities take the form of special testing, tracking, financial, and academic programs to select those with the abilities and personal qualities to move into higher economic levels.

The process of creaming—selecting the most talented and ambitious members of the working and middle classes to move up the economic ladder—also has the additional benefit to the ruling class of adding new ideas, energy, and perspectives to the power elite. This effectively co-opts leadership in the working and middle classes and leaves those selected to advance, isolated and alienated from their communities. Programs to provide educational, job, and housing opportunities for those who lack resources were hard fought for and are necessary to provide more opportunity. But without a more serious leveling of the playing field between the owning classes and the rest of the population, the gap in opportunity to succeed in this country will continue to grow larger. And those with the least opportunities will continue to have to compete with each other in a society with a shortage of affordable housing, too few jobs and job training programs, and diminishing educational opportunities. On top of that, without addressing race and gender based discrimination in these areas, people of color and working-class white women will continue to face serious disadvantages in competing with working-class white men for unnecessarily scarce resources.

Controlling People

People at the bottom have always gotten together and organized to change the system into one that is more fair and democratic. First white men, then men of color, and then all women, and most recently young adults between 18 and 21 have gained the right to vote through organized struggle. The abolition movement, civil rights movement, women's liberation movement, disability rights movement, lesbian and gay liberation movements have all fought for greater inclusion and participation in society.

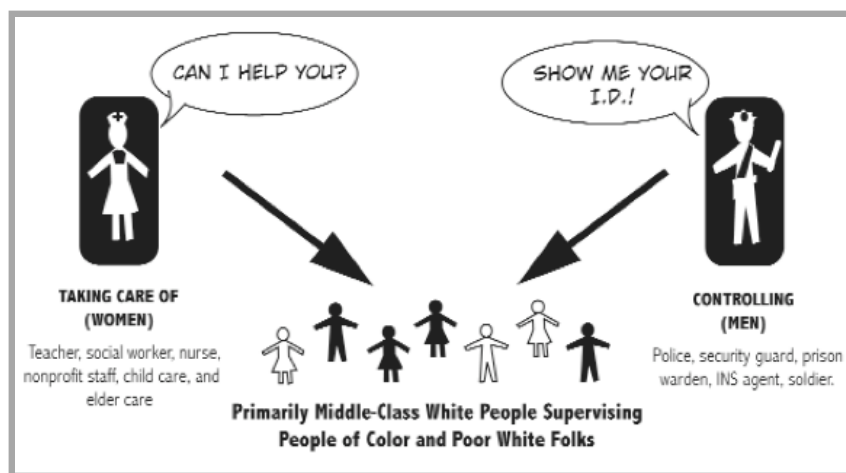
The struggle against injustice in all forms is continuous. The ruling class has, therefore, needed people to control those at the bottom. Some of the male-dominated occupations are police, security guards, prison wardens, immigration officials, deans and administrators, soldiers, members of the National Guard and state militias, and, of course, the father of the family as the disciplinarian. Most boys are trained for occupations that will help control people and maintain the system for the ruling class. The power elite has used government troops and state militias to control workers; police and prison guards to control communities



of color; immigration officials and border guards to control immigrants; soldiers to control other countries; security guards to control petty theft and access to personal and business property; and the FBI and the CIA to control dissidents here and in other countries. A significant number of men are employed in jobs that are explicitly enforcement roles. Before September 11, 2001, employment at the FBI stood at 27,000; the Drug Enforcement Administration at 10,000; Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms at 4,000; Secret Service at 6,000; Border Patrol at 10,000; Customs Service at 12,000; and Immigration and Naturalization Service at 34,000. Local police forces, security guards, and prison wardens add hundreds of thousands more. The federal government has recently added 28,000 baggage screeners to this work force.³

Taking care of those at the bottom, keeping hope alive, and controlling those who rebel are the primary functions of those who have jobs in the buffer zone. The division in roles is not absolute. There is a lot of control built in to the “helping” professions, and there are always attempts to put a kinder face on controlling work (i.e. community policing). Many in the buffer zone are white although, because of the gains won through the civil rights and women’s liberation movement era, there are small but increasing numbers of people of color working there. Racial and gender job stratification typically means that white men control or manage men of color, and white women control or manage women of color in private, public, and nonprofit sector jobs. Men are taught to expect to control women in both work and interpersonal spheres.

For those of us in the buffer zone, the challenge is how to do our jobs subversively. How can we take the meager funds we receive for direct services and use our resources to educate people about



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³ Califano Jr., Joseph A. “Too Many Federal Cops.” Washington Post. December 6, 2001.



the issues, empower them to make changes in their own lives, and help them organize with others to demand change in the system.

One way to do this is to de-professionalize our work, and assume that battered women, homeless people, school dropouts, and the unemployed can do the work that we do if given the information, skills, and opportunity.

Another part of being subversive is giving people information from the inside of agencies and institutions about what is really going on. Who makes decisions? Where does most of the money go? Who really benefits from these programs? Instead of advocating for people's interests we can help them learn how to advocate for themselves. We can focus on leadership skills just as much as survival skills, social change just as much as social service. There are numerous ways to work subversively from within the buffer zone when we think less about how to help some individuals get ahead, and more about how to help the community get together.

Managing the Buffer Zone

At the top of the buffer zone are members of the managerial class. They set the standards and norms for their professions. Members of the managerial class determine policy and curricula at the main training and educational institutions, and they run the professional associations. They may have connections with funders from the ruling class and with members of the power elite. They determine who moves up in their professions, what are acceptable practices, and they make sure that those carrying out buffer zone jobs do so in ways that contain and control those at the bottom of the pyramid rather than support and empower them.

Even in fields in which women predominate, such as teaching, counseling, therapy, and social work, many of those in higher levels of management and training positions are white men. Some have been screened and trained by elite universities and professional schools. Many of the others have come through professional or vocational training programs which rely on curricula developed primarily by men from the managerial class at elite universities and professional schools. In either case, they are exposed to attitudes and values that support the hierarchical structures of society.

Most people enter the helping professions from a heartfelt desire to help people succeed and thrive. Many feel a strong conflict with the professional "best" practices in their field. They can see that,



although some people may succeed in the system, many more will fail. They may feel that their work has been structured to be only minimally effective in helping people or changing things. There is much resistance from them towards the managers and administrators they encounter. There is a constant struggle between those practitioners who are trying to undermine the rigid hierarchies of our society and the managers and administrators who are trying to maintain them.

It is the job of the members of the managerial class to promote those workers, programs, and organizations in the buffer zone who accept and comply with the system, and screen out, render ineffective, or get rid of those who challenge it. They usually have no choice because they are accountable to their funders. Sometimes the funder is a governmental agency, sometimes (and increasingly) a corporation, but in most cases, it is likely to involve at least some funding from a foundation. Today, buffer zone work is likely to be funded by a combination of government and private funding.

Please send comments, feedback, resources, and suggestions for distribution to paul@paulkivel.com. Further resources are available at www.paulkivel.com.