



Allies, Collaborators, and Agents

By Paul Kivel

Every white person plays a role in either maintaining racism as a collaborator or agent, or challenging it as an ally. An *ally* takes an active, strategic role in confronting racism. A *collaborator*, on the other hand, is someone who follows the rules (which are set up to benefit white people), doesn't make waves and makes sure that people of color don't have the information and resources they need to move ahead. Collaborators don't have to be overtly racist (although some are) because the organizations or institutions around them maintain racism without their active contribution. They simply collude with the status quo rather than challenging it. A collaborator says, "I'm just doing my job, just getting by, just raising my family. Racism doesn't affect me." But they continue enjoying the benefits of being white and ignore the costs of racism.

In reality, most of us are *agents* - more actively complicit in perpetuating racism than collaborators. Many of us find ourselves in situations in which, because of racism, we have more status, seniority, experience or inside connections than people of color. This may be in the PTA, in a civic group, in a congregation, in a recreational program, on the job, at school or in a neighborhood. As an ally, we can be welcoming and share information, resources, and support. Or as an agent we can be unwelcoming. We may not share all of the information or resources we have with them. We might set limits on their participation by failing to provide culturally appropriate outreach and opportunities. We may favor other white people with our warmth, information or support. We may give people of color the message that they are not as welcome, not as legitimate, not as acceptable as friends, neighbors, shoppers, members or classmates. In this way most of us, perhaps not consciously or intentionally, act as agents to maintain a white culture of power.

There is an even stronger sense in which I use the word agent - to refer to the way that many of us have become agents of the ruling class in maintaining racism through the roles we play in the community.

People in the ruling class - those who are at the top of the economic pyramid - have never wanted to deal directly with people on the bottom of the pyramid, but have wanted to prevent them from organizing for power. Therefore they have created a space that buffers them from the rest of the population. I call this the *buffer zone*. The buffer zone consists of all the jobs that carry out the agenda of the ruling class without ruling class presence.

The buffer zone has three primary purposes.

1) The first function is to take care of people on the bottom of the pyramid. If there were a literal free-for-all for the 5% of the wealth that 80% of us have to fight over, there would be chaos and many more people would be dying in the streets (instead of dying invisibly in homes, hospitals, prisons, rest homes and homeless shelters). So there are many occupations to sort out which people get how much of the five percent, and to take care of those who aren't really making it. Social welfare workers, nurses, teachers, counselors, case workers of various sorts, advocates for various groups – all these workers (who are mostly women) take care of people at the bottom of the pyramid.

2) The second function of jobs in the buffer zone is to keep hope alive, to keep alive the myth that anyone can make it in this society, that there is a level playing field and that racism and other forms of discrimination are just minor inconveniences. These jobs, sometimes the same as the caring jobs, determine which people will be the lucky ones to receive jobs and job training, a college education, decent housing or healthcare. Those in these jobs convince people that if they just work hard, follow the rules and don't make waves, they too can get ahead and gain a few benefits from the system. Sometimes getting ahead in this context means getting a job in the buffer zone and becoming one of the people who hands out the benefits.

Before the Civil Rights movement there was no need to keep hope alive because most white people did not see racial apartheid as contrary to US ideals. They simply believed that people of color received what they deserved and were naturally inferior. Since racial



discrimination is no longer legal, a different system of explanation for racial apartheid is necessary. When a few people of color are allowed to succeed, they can be held of as examples of the end of racism, and all other people of color can be condemned for not being able to take advantage of the wonderful opportunities they have to be successful. Institutionalized racism can then be ignored.

For example, Bill Cosby, Oprah Winfrey, Michael Jordan and most recently President Barack Obama become proof to white people that there are no barriers left. We might say “What more could they possibly want?” or “Why are they still complaining?” We can pretend to be colorblind and simply ignore persistent discrimination, criminalization, marginalization and everyday racism that people of color experience by keeping our attention on the exceptions.

To some extent, keeping hope alive works to keep some people of color believing that they too can make it. But more importantly, it misleads white people into thinking that the system works, and that those for whom it doesn't have only themselves to blame.¹

3) The final function of jobs in the buffer zone is to maintain the system by controlling those who want to make changes. Because people at the bottom keep fighting for change, people at the top need occupations that keep people in their place in our families, schools and neighborhoods, and even overseas in other countries. Police, security guards, prison wardens, soldiers, deans and administrators, immigration officials and fathers in their role as “the discipline in the family” - these are all primarily male buffer zone roles designed to keep people in their place in the hierarchy. (These roles are not always so distinct. For instance, many caring roles, such as social worker, also have a strong client surveillance and control element to them, and the police are now trying to soften their image by including a caring component, using community policing strategies to build trust.)

Some of us are in more powerful positions, where we supervise people of color or allocate benefits to them such as jobs, housing, welfare, and educational opportunities. Others of us are in jobs where we monitor or control people of color as police, immigration officials, deans or soldiers. We are paid agents of the ruling class, instructed to use racism to insure that although a few people of color may advance



individually to keep hope alive, people of color as a group don't advance and the racial hierarchy does not change.

Notes:

1. For a demonstration of how this reasoning applies to the massive incarceration of African American men see Michelle Alexander. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New Press, 2010, p. 235.

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