DAVID G. GIL

Updated with a new preface

CONFRONTING

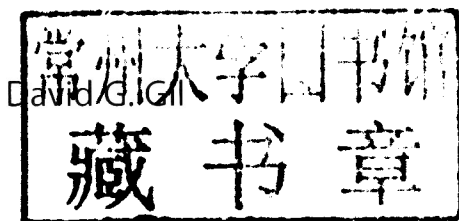*Injustice and Oppression*

CONCEPTS *and* STRATEGIES
for SOCIAL WORKERS

Confronting Injustice and Oppression

Concepts and Strategies for Social Workers

Updated with a New Preface

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Confronting Injustice and Oppression

Social work has a unique history, purpose, perspective, and method. The primary purpose of this series is to articulate these distinct qualities and to define and explore the ideas, concepts, and skills that together constitute social work's intellectual foundations and boundaries and its emerging issues and concerns.

To accomplish this goal, the series will publish a cohesive collection of books that address both the core knowledge of the profession and its newly emerging topics. The core is defined by the evolving consensus, as primarily reflected in the Council of Social Work Education's Curriculum Policy Statement, concerning what courses accredited social work education programs must include in their curricula. The series will be characterized by an emphasis on the widely embraced ecological perspective; attention to issues concerning direct and indirect practice; and emphasis on cultural diversity and multiculturalism, social justice, oppression, populations at risk, and social work values and ethics. The series will have a dual focus on practice traditions and emerging issues and concepts.

The complete series list follows the index.

To Eva, my partner in life and work.

To teachers, students, colleagues, and friends
near and far in time and place,
whose thoughts and practice
this book reflects;

To people everywhere
who pursue community
where all are equal and free
and human potential can flourish.

In memory of
Mohamed Bouazizi
March 29, 1984–January 4, 2011
whose self-immolation in Tunis
on December 17, 2010
to protest dehumanizing oppression
started the "Arab Spring"

Acknowledgments

Preface to the 2013 Reissue

Preparing a second edition of *Confronting Injustice and Oppression* nearly fifteen years after its original publication offers an opportunity to review its assumptions, perspectives, and conclusions and to note some relevant, unexpected developments during the intervening years.

The book suggested that exploitation and social injustice were established coercively, some ten thousand years ago, following the spread of agriculture. Since then, exploitation and injustice have evolved into nearly universal existential realities, maintained by political, ideological, and physical oppression and by validation in the consciousness of their agents and beneficiaries, as well as of their victims.

The book also suggested that transcending the realities of exploitation, injustice, and oppression and transforming them into just and cooperative ways of life would require extended efforts by nonviolent liberation movements aiming to facilitate revisions of consciousness conducive to a social justice culture. For governments, unless challenged by social movements, tend to sustain established social, economic, political, and ideological realities, regardless of their unjust consequences.

Recent social movements for the liberation of women and for civil rights for various minorities illustrate the validity of this hypothesis.

I continue to consider valid the book's analysis of social injustice and oppression and of strategies for constructive social change, as well as the assumptions noted in the introduction.

The book did not discern in mainstream U.S. politics social movements pursuing social justice and human liberation, for such movements tend to function only on the "left" margin of its political spectrum. One can identify, however, persistent efforts to suppress social justice activism, including labeling it "un-American." Moreover, though the United States is a predominantly Christian culture, the social justice philosophy and practice of Christ and his disciples and early followers, as described in the Gospels—"they held all things in common" (Acts 2:44–45)—are usually not advocated by contemporary U.S. churches.

Until December 17, 2010, social injustice, oppression, and corruption by dominant social classes and governments were widespread in North Africa and the Middle East, yet social movements that might challenge these conditions were not active over recent decades and did not coordinate their efforts. This changed dramatically on that December day, when Mohamed Bouazizi, a street vendor in Tunis, set himself on fire to protest the confiscation of his merchandise by local officials. His self-immolation incited mass demonstrations throughout Tunisia. Following his death on January 4, 2011, the protests intensified and eventually forced President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali to resign on January 14, 2011, after twenty-three years in power, and to flee to Saudi Arabia. The overthrow of the president was followed by a democratic election of a constituent assembly and a new president. News of the Tunisian uprising spread quickly, with help from contemporary social media and networks—cell phones, Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, YouTube—and inspired popular protests against autocratic governments throughout North Africa and the Middle East. Thus began the Arab Spring.

Less than two years after these revolutionary events in Tunisia, governments in Egypt, Libya, and Yemen were overthrown and replaced. The president of Egypt, Hosni Mubarak, was tried and imprisoned for life; the Libyan leader, Muammar Gaddafi, was killed; and the president of Yemen, Ali Abdullah Saleh, resigned and was replaced in an election.

Opposition forces in Libya were supported by UN-authorized interventions against military assaults on urban population centers. Uprisings also began in Bahrain and Syria. Massive protests occurred in Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, and Oman, while minor protests occurred in Lebanon, Mauritania, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Western Sahara. Governments in several countries tried to suppress protests violently, and in other countries, governments granted limited concessions.

The protests of the Arab Spring challenged such issues of injustice and oppression as dictatorship and absolute monarchy, government corruption and the related concentration of wealth, human rights violations, unemployment, severe poverty, and rising food prices. The reluctance of well-educated young people to submit to the status quo was an important source of the uprisings. Most of the protests and demonstrations were initiated and conducted nonviolently. However, military responses by some governments to nonviolent demonstrations resulted in violent reactions by protesters.

It is too soon to analyze the outcomes of the Arab Spring. However, one can already observe that significant transformations are emerging in public consciousness and in structures and styles of governance. Matters seem unlikely to return to the conditions prevailing in the region before December 17, 2010.

Nine months into the Arab Spring, on September 17, 2011, a protest movement, Occupy Wall Street (OWS), held its first gathering in Zuccotti Park in the financial district of New York City. This may have been the first time that a social movement in the United States openly confronted issues of massive social injustice and oppression. OWS in New York City led quickly to similar Occupy groups not only across the United States but also in many countries across the world. The targets of these protests were major social and economic inequalities, greed, corruption, and heavy influence of corporations on government decisions. Their slogan, "We are the 99 percent," refers to the steadily growing inequalities of income and wealth between the wealthiest 1 percent of the population and everyone else.

To put its issues on the public agenda, OWS practices nonviolent direct action rather than conventional politics. These actions include occupation of public and private sites, civil disobedience, marches,

demonstrations, and protest rallies. OWS does not have a formal leadership structure, nor has it formulated specific policy goals. It uses a consensus model in open general assemblies for decision making. OWS has had mixed relations with local authorities and police departments. Its actions have been tolerated and even supported at some times and places and prohibited at others. It usually receives good coverage by the media. Participants in OWS are diverse in age, gender, race, and religion. Funding for the activities of OWS comes from voluntary donations of individual participants and supporters in the community.

Responses to the activities and demands of OWS have, so far, been mixed. President Obama and several Democratic Party leaders have made supportive comments, while Republican leaders and presidential candidates expressed critical but not intolerant views. It seems likely that the massive social and economic inequalities that OWS addresses—though without identifying their roots in the capitalist economy and culture of the United States—will remain on the public agenda for the foreseeable future. This was certainly not the case fifteen years ago, when *Confronting Injustice and Oppression* was first published.

These recent events were expressions of inherent human tendencies to yearn for social justice and freedom and to resist oppression. While it is not possible to predict the times, locations, and substance of specific manifestations of these powerful human tendencies, one can be sure that struggles by social movements for justice and liberation will continue to occur as long as oppression remains and until social justice is established from local to global levels.

Confronting Injustice and Oppression

Contents

INTRODUCTION

The Relevance of Injustice and Oppression
for Social Work and Social Policy

SOCIAL WORKERS and social policy professionals have always been involved with victims of injustice and oppression. Yet though they tend to grasp intuitively and emotionally the meaning of these dehumanizing conditions, they usually lack theoretical insights into their causes and into strategies to transform unjust and oppressive social, economic, and political institutions into just and nonoppressive alternatives. To close such a gap in social work knowledge, this book aims to develop theoretical insights concerning:

- The sources and dynamics of injustice and oppression
- Strategies for social change to overcome injustice and oppression
- Implications of these insights for social work practice and social policy development and advocacy

These insights seem essential to effective practice for social workers and social policy analysts and advocates, as most issues they have dealt with in the past and are dealing with now are directly or indirectly related to the dynamics and conditions of injustice and oppression.

In exploring these theoretical, historical, strategic, and practice issues, the book addresses the ethical, professional, and educational mandates expressed or implied in the Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), the International Declaration of Ethical Principles of Social Work of the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), and the Curriculum Policy Statement of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) for graduate and undergraduate social work education. Relevant statements from these policy documents are quoted here.

NASW Code of Ethics, 2008 (Excerpts)

Ethical Principles: Social workers challenge social injustice. Social workers pursue social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people. Social workers' social change efforts are focused primarily on issues of poverty, unemployment, discrimination, and other forms of social injustice. These activities seek to promote sensitivity to and knowledge about oppression and cultural and ethnic diversity. Social workers strive to ensure access to needed information, services, and resources; equality of opportunity; and meaningful participation in decision making for all people.

Social Workers' Ethical Responsibility to the Broader Society

Social workers should promote the general welfare of society, from local to global levels, and the development of people, their communities, and their environment. Social workers should advocate for living conditions conducive to the fulfillment of basic human needs and should promote social, economic, political, and cultural values and institutions that are compatible with the realization of social justice.

Social workers should act to prevent and eliminate domination of, exploitation of, and discrimination against any person, group, or class on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, age, marital status, political belief, religion, immigration status, or mental or physical disability.

IFSW Ethics in Social Work, Statement of Principles, 2012 (Excerpts)

Human Rights and Human Dignity

Social work is based on respect for the inherent worth and dignity of all people, and the rights that follow from this. Social workers should uphold and defend each person's physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual integrity and well-being. This means:

1. Respecting the right to self-determination
2. Promoting the right to participation
3. Treating each person as a whole
4. Identifying and developing strengths

Social Justice

Social workers have a responsibility to promote social justice, in relation to society generally, and in relation to the people with whom they work. This means:

1. Challenging negative discrimination
2. Recognising diversity
3. Distributing resources equitably
4. Challenging unjust policies and practices
5. Working in solidarity

CSWE, 1994 (Excerpts)

Promotion of Social and Economic Justice

Programs of social work education must provide an understanding of the dynamics and consequences of social and economic injustice, including all forms of human oppression and discrimination. They must provide students with skills to promote social change and to implement a wide range of interventions that further the achievement of individual