

# Resistance and Radical Love

## The Call-Forward of a Pro-Black Sector

Organizations that adapt to the new demands of people with a new consciousness have a chance to survive. But to do so . . . they will need to reinvigorate themselves with the spirit of resistance and radical love that the Black freedom movements—to which this sector owes so much—have taught are essential to change.

by *Dax-Devlon Ross*

### I. THE DAWN OF EVERYTHING

In their recent book *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*, archaeologist David Wengrow and the late anarchist-anthropologist David Graeber present a take on the story of human history that upends everything we have been taught to believe about how humans once lived, why we became what we are, and, most important, the inevitability of our social arrangements—specifically, hierarchy and inequality.<sup>1</sup>

The book opens with a radical reappraisal of eighteenth-century European civilization. The narrative that we are fed in school is that the Age of Enlightenment was this glorious culmination of human history—the ultimate flowering of a species that had bumbled around in superstition and savagery for thousands of years until it discovered agriculture, at which point such things as standing armies, grain stockpiles, labor specialization, the scientific method, and, ultimately, democracy propelled us out of the backwaters of the Middle Ages. Modern, advanced civilization as we know it flourished exclusively in Europe because, as popular historians like Jared Diamond have told us in recent decades, certain sociological and geographical forces combined with technological advances wrought by plentiful available resources gave Europe a head start on the rest of the world.<sup>2</sup>

Graeber and Wengrow use the archaeological and anthropological record to puncture this virtually airtight view of human progress. Specifically, through evidence—much of which has been available to their fields for decades but elided for assorted ideological reasons—they compellingly reveal that the origins of the critique that catapulted forward Enlightenment thinking actually arose from Native American critiques of European society in the 1700s.<sup>3</sup> These critiques were, in turn, appropriated by disgruntled intellectuals challenging the various monarchies ruling over their wretched, violent, and generally brief lives. Graeber and Wengrow meticulously document the growing popularity of this social critique in France several







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decades before the revolution that would signal the beginning of the modern democratic state. Via salon-style conversations, best-selling novels, and long-running plays, French culture devoured Native American stories that consistently denigrated coarse competition, greed, privatization of property, and blind fealty to church and state—not to mention one’s duty to proper society—basically, everything that feudal France stood for.<sup>4</sup> For most, France—indeed, all of Europe—was an unpleasant world to live in, and the Native critique gave language to that angst and a vision for an entirely other way of life. “The idea that our current ideals of freedom, equality and democracy are somehow products of the ‘Western tradition,’” write Graeber and Wengrow, “would in fact come as an enormous surprise to someone like Voltaire.”<sup>5</sup>

Alas, this is not where that story ends.

The critique threatened the pecuniary and expansionist interests of those who saw in the “New World” vast land to expropriate. Those interests found their moral vector in the writings of Anne Robert Jacques Turgot, an economist who considered the Native American critique “disturbing, even dangerous,” and in turn proposed a countercritique: Native societies were savage;<sup>6</sup> whatever so-called “freedoms” they enjoyed came at the expense of technological innovations that benefited humanity by evolving it to its next phase of social development; inequality and hierarchy were unfortunate yet unavoidable by-products of progress. According to Turgot’s social evolution theory, “Egalitarian societies were banished to the bottom of this ladder, where at best they could provide some insight on how our distant ancestors might have lived; but certainly could no longer be imagined

as equal parties to a dialogue about how the inhabitants of wealthy and powerful societies should conduct themselves in the present.”<sup>7</sup> (Turgot helped invent a secular, humanist “Doctrine of Discovery,” and counted Adam Smith, author of *The Wealth of Nations* [1776], among his admirers.)

There was still one problem. What was to be done with the Indigenous American critique? That genie couldn’t be rebottled—the new ideas stoked by the New World thinkers were too alluring. History’s solution was to credit European philosophers with originating enlightenment ideas that they had then transmuted through fictitious Native American social critics in order to avoid charges of social heresy. This convoluted and racist rationale not only stuck, it traveled back across the Atlantic—so that, when Frederick Douglass articulately denounced American slavery a century later, even sympathetic white audiences questioned his authenticity. Either he had never been enslaved, they whispered, or he was parroting the ideas that had been fed to him by abolitionist benefactors like William Lloyd Garrison.<sup>8</sup> By the mid-nineteenth century, the notion that a nonwhite person had a distinct worldview, let alone one that challenged the order of things, was just too outrageous to take at face value.

## **II. ANTI-BLACK BOOBY TRAPS AND WHITE SUPREMACY FAIL-SAFES**

In many ways, the critique of white supremacy culture that took center stage amid the racial reckoning of 2020 mirrored the Native American critique of European culture four hundred years earlier. Like its antecedent, the white supremacy culture critique struck at deeply held beliefs core to the dominant group’s identity. In recasting key features of white supremacy—individualism, perfectionism, hypercompetitiveness, hierarchical power structures, fixation on control, and presumption of superiority—as cultural preferences rather than universal truths, the critique forced white people of goodwill to ask themselves if they may have inadvertently colluded with a toxic system rigged to benefit their interests. Suddenly facing the twin crises of conscience and legitimacy, they turned to Black people for advice, and thus spawned the antiracist shelf at your local bookstore.

Within the nonprofit sector, something else occurred. Organizations eager to root out white supremacy culture went on ephemeral diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) journeys. For a season or two, it became the thing to do—a way of signaling to the world that they were with the times, on the right side

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of history, doing the work, and so on. Invariably, the first step on the penance pilgrimage, aside from holding space for dialogue, was to go on a vision quest for authentic Black leaders—preferably and ideally, Black women. In short order, my LinkedIn feed became a waterfall of Black faces with fancy new titles. It was a dope moment in time.

If only solving racism were that simple.

Once inside, the new Black leaders discovered they'd been set up. That racial equity initiative that they'd been sold on in the interview process? Well, they were it. Oh, and the board was still really struggling to get behind this new strand of antiracist work; it just wasn't resonating with them. And just one more *smallish* thing: The staff of color? Yeah, they were fed up with the entrenched power dynamics, which they viewed as features of white supremacy culture—and they expected their new Black leader to do something about it.

For their part, the Black leaders took each shock to the system in stride. Nothing had ever come easy, so why would this be any different? Besides, they had fought to get into a position to make the changes they were now poised to make. So, they rallied their teams with a mix of inspiration, determination, commitment, and charisma. But once the work began and even the *appearance* of change materialized in the hazy distance, an assortment of anti-Black booby traps and white supremacy fail-safes manifested:

- Isn't a focus on race too narrow?
- I think we've already done plenty to address this issue already.
- Talking about racism may compromise our nonpartisan status.
- We don't have many people of color in our community, so this doesn't really apply to us.
- What are the measures we're using here?
- Who authorized this?
- What are the credentials of these people we're bringing in?

Frankly, it was bizarre. Everyone could acknowledge that there were systemic barriers to access and certain ways of operating that just weren't conducive to an antiracist workplace, but aside from hiring a Black leader, no one seemed prepared for the change work ahead. Not even Black leaders.

And why should they have been?

As one senior nonprofit leader I recently interviewed said, "Ten years ago we couldn't even utter the word *racism* in our organization." Another revealed, "I learned to stop being a rebel a long time ago." At a certain point, they and others I have interviewed realized that they were operating in a white-dominant sector, and decided to play by its rules. They got the right degrees from the right schools. They gained the requisite leadership and management skills that the sector said they needed in order to get ahead. They earned the trust of the gatekeepers. In exchange, the system rewarded them with more authority and responsibility.

In truth, as brilliant and accomplished as these Black leaders were, they couldn't possibly be the living, breathing antidotes to white supremacy culture everyone had secretly hoped for. In fact, they often symbolized the exact opposite of a remedy. Many of these leaders had never spent time within Black organizing and movement traditions. By and large, their careers had been nurtured within white institutional power structures. Their very existence at the top of their organizational chart further validated Turgot's theory: Once enlightened through education and exposure, even the descendants of the enslaved and oppressed embrace social evolution's inevitable demands for hierarchy and inequality.

In fairness, the entire arrangement was totally fucked up. Somehow, the same job that their white predecessor had performed without any racial competence now demanded expertise in Afrocentrism, Black radicalism, Black liberation theory, Black feminism, and Black futurism—not to mention a certificate in somatics for racial healing.

And yet, the injustice of the outsized expectations thrust upon Black leaders does not change the fact that the

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nonprofit sector is at an existential impasse. Is it a coincidence that so many nonprofit organizations—grassroots to corporate, hyperlocal to national—are experiencing internal turmoil? That overworked frontline staff everywhere are refusing to remain silent about the injustices they see? That turnover is so staggeringly high, and once sought-after positions remain unfilled? That managers are so fearful of saying or doing the wrong thing that they choose silence and acquiescence over the risk of being called out? Or that leaders, even those of color, feel so battered by the unrelenting assault from their people, who are themselves hurting?

These are all casualties of a workplace civil war, the stakes of which are the identity and future direction of a sector. Some of the turmoil and accompanying turnover is necessary. We do need to hold each other—and be held—accountable when we create harm. We also need to appreciate that we are all operating within a system of intersecting oppressions and often just doing the best we can with the tools at our disposal. This isn't an apology or a scolding. It is just a reminder that progressive communities are often eroded from within.

While individual organizations are coming to terms with the new reality that changes are necessary, the sector as a whole has yet to fully grasp that the traditional rules of engagement are no longer applicable. For the past two generations, young people who wanted to give back and carry forward civil and human rights struggles had three options: government, education, or the nonprofit sector. That's no longer the case. The private sector has caught on in the past two years. It has figured out that younger workers expect their employers to align with their

values—that is, to be diverse and inclusive, yes, but also engaged in the social justice issues that matter to them. And now that the racial reckoning and remote work have arrived, some of the most recognizable companies in the world are competing hard for the same talented, idealistic, and committed young people—those of color especially—who once fell into the nonprofit sector's lap.

What this all means is that quality candidates—especially those of color and with choices—will no longer accept starvation wages as a rite of passage. It also means that people expect to have a meaningful say in the work—where, how much, how fast, and for whose benefit. And, they expect their organizations to take a stand on the issues that matter to them, even if doing so is risky.

This predicament can't be resolved with a new strategic plan alone or a DEI journey that has no real objective or destination. The voices pushing for change demand new arrangements among free people who elect to work for a cause they care about. Yet, from the privileged perch upon which I sit as an outsider-insider, many in the sector are still operating as if it were 2019. The people closest and most essential to the work are still paid the least and asked to do the most. The people in charge are still making top-down decisions that affect the lives of those they claim to care about. Accountability still flows to funders first and foremost. Funders are still reluctant to make transformative investments in the new leaders of color and get out of the way. Transparency is spotty. Distrust is high. In a nutshell, many (but definitely not all) in the sector are spinning their wheels in a snowbank.

### **III. CENTERING BLACK EPISTEMOLOGIES**

Given everything that I have laid out, the fresh perspective on human history that *The Dawn of Everything* offers us couldn't have come at a better time. The archaeological records that it lays before readers show us that early humans were much more creative and inventive—even playful—than the standard narrative of human progress allows. Graeber and Wengrow introduce us to societies that oscillated between egalitarian and authoritarian structures depending on the time of year and the needs of the community, and societies that intentionally eschewed agriculture because it wasn't worth giving up the freedoms they enjoyed, not because they didn't know how to plant and grow food. They reveal the outlines of ancient cities inhabited by thousands yet without any sign of centralized government as we understand it. In fact, the authors conclude that for the last five

thousand years of human history, the empires and kingdoms that figure so prominently in our imaginative (indeed, cinematic) universe were “exceptional islands of political hierarchy, surrounded by much larger territories whose inhabitants . . . systematically avoided fixed, overarching systems of authority.”<sup>9</sup> In many of these territories, even when the leader issued a pronouncement, the rank and file could choose consent or dissent without fear of punishment—because that was what freedom meant.

In this way, and despite the many faults critics will surely find with the book, *The Dawn of Everything* destabilizes our notion of the one thing that matters most to the powerful: the sovereignty of the West’s history-of-the-world narrative as we know it.

But what does all of this mean to the nonprofit sector?

This: If these ancestors of ours weren’t “ignorant savages” (as we have been led to believe), and the narrative of social evolution, which tells us that they led “primitive,” simplistic lives devoid of political consciousness, is contrary to the actual record, then what else is counterfactual? If rather than not knowing any better they consciously chose to arrange their lives to facilitate freedom of fealty and egalitarianism over hierarchy, what did they know that we seem to have lost sight of? Once we are liberated from the straitjacket of received histories curated to confine our imagination to Europe (and, by extension, Anglo America) as the center of civilization, what other options for organizing our affairs become available to us? And then, once unencumbered by the grip of Western conceptions of what constitutes knowledge, reality—indeed, civilization itself—where might we look for guidance on alternative conceptions?

In the American context, the answer is obvious. We need to look to the lineages that have been actively resisting cultural, economic, physical, psychological, and epistemological destruction for as long as it has been imposed upon them. How have they perceived reality? How have they operated? What have they believed? What have they desired? And, most important, how have they survived? This necessarily challenges a sector in crisis to engage—not just go on a learning journey—the realities, theories, and ideologies of the people who have sought safe harbor in its midst and for whom, by and large, the sector exists in the first place: oppressed, minoritized, and otherwise marginalized communities—that is, folks of color.

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Historically, the sector has never felt obligated to engage with the worldviews, theories, or ideologies presented by nonwhite people. Because that knowledge has been traditionally developed and practiced on the margins of the gate-keeping institutions, in secret and often in defiance of its norms, it has been regarded as “folk wisdom” or “traditional knowledge”—a polite way of saying *inferior*. When that knowledge has directly challenged the dominant worldview using the master’s tools, it and its creators have been vigorously discredited, often by other folks of color who have been provided a megaphone—as we are witnessing in real time with critical race theory. Finally, when neither that knowledge nor its creators can be silenced, it is either assimilated—the words *lived experience* and *intersectionality* are uttered ad nauseum in the sector—or whitewashed, as is the case with Dr. King each January.

At its essence, my vision for a pro-Black sector is one in which we are all comfortable showing up in the work as ourselves rather than as that which a white ideal says we need to be in order to be considered valid; we are witnessed and appreciated for who we are and what we bring rather than disparaged for what we are not and what we don’t; we are believed and listened to when we share our knowledge, even when such knowledge is derived from unconventional sources; we are meaningfully and honestly consulted on decisions that impact our lives; we are trusted to do the work we have been called to do without being second-guessed or surveilled; we take time to face the conflicts that naturally arise among people trying to change—even, and especially, when doing so is uncomfortable; we have the agency to challenge

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inequity and injustice, whether its source is external or internal; we are led by people of integrity who are accountable to our collective best interests, not just their own career advancement.

Just as I do not believe that hiring a Black person resolves organizational DEI issues, I also do not believe that replacing white supremacy culture with pro-Black principles automatically ensures the sector's salvation. What I do believe is that a sector that centers pro-Black practices and behaviors can help us *all* shed the constraints—polite rather than kind, nice rather than truthful, passive-aggressive rather than accountable, fear-based rather than trust-based, competitive rather than cooperative, tight-fisted rather than generous, rigid rather than adaptive, and impersonal rather than loving—that so many of us know afflict the current organizational ethos.

So, in this moment of upheaval, what if the sector were to take seriously not just the Black people calling for change but also Black worldviews and theories embedded within liberatory movements that have facilitated Black survival and thriving in a society hostile to its existence? What organizing features (guiding principles, beliefs, and values) might be revealed and used to address the dissonance in our midst?<sup>10</sup> To be clear, I am not proposing an exhaustive or even comprehensive taxonomy at this juncture; I am interested in beginning to surface the ways in which Black liberatory struggles—pro-Black agendas—have confronted *some* of the issues at play within the nonprofit sector at this moment, in hopes that bringing them to the foreground may broaden the conversation and, crucially, stoke genuine experimentation within organizations struggling to move through the seemingly unending waves of conflict.

#### **IV. EIGHT PRINCIPLES FOR A TRANSFORMED SECTOR**

**1. The question of identity.** At the top of the year, I met with leaders from three different organizations in a single afternoon. Back-to-back calls. These leaders didn't know one another, functioned in different fields, and were based in vastly different parts of the country: the Southeast, the Midwest, and Southern California. They shared the same basic story, however: Up until two years ago, they knew exactly who they were; but now, one didn't know if their nonprofit was a social justice organization or an education-access program; the second didn't know if their mission was to advocate for policy changes or to promote racial healing; and the third didn't know if their organization existed to create jobs toward opportunity for youth or to create political activists to fight the system.

The ripple effects of 2020 are being felt everywhere in the sector, but especially vis-à-vis the question of identity: Who are we, now that we have named racism as a feature of our work?

Since arriving on slave ships, Black folks have been asked and have had to ask ourselves time and time again who we are and where we fit. And in every moment in which Black identity has been attacked, Black liberation movements have arisen to give a sense of coherence, dignity, and purpose to a people on the brink of physical and psychological obliteration. Every one of these movements—Black emancipation, Black suffrage, Black Power, Black Lives Matter—have offered three anchors to their adherents: a compelling counternarrative, a community of care, and a spiritual base.

In a very real sense, Black liberation movements offer a starting point for nonprofits asking themselves who they are and what their purpose is. Many of these organizations had great success telling a story that no longer resonates in 2022, because it had been soft-pedaled for a white audience. Many lost both their unofficial and official culture carriers—usually women of color—to exhaustion, frustration, or, simply, an opportunity they had been qualified for a decade ago. Now these organizations are searching for a new story and new culture carriers, but they are finding both hard to come by unless they commit to change regardless of whether or not it comes at a cost. Unfortunately, many organizations are just not there yet. They still want the high-powered donors *and* to be all about social justice, when history shows that those two streams inevitably converge, and one must give way to the other.



So, to the organizations asking themselves who they are, my response is: Figure out what your story is, who your community is, and what are their deepest beliefs.

**2. The demand for moral authority.** It is no secret that traditional leadership structures are being contested in the nonprofit sector. Shared leadership, collective leadership, and distributed leadership have all gained currency in the past two years. The theory I've been feeling of late is that leaders within the nonprofit sector are rarely chosen by the staff or by the communities they are brought in to represent. Increasingly, these handpicked leaders serve at the pleasure of disconnected boards who hire people to reflect their values, beliefs, and interests. This approach to leadership selection is a problem—an affront, actually—to people for whom the work is not just a job but a calling.

Black Lives Matter faced criticism when it consciously eschewed the traditional leadership model and resisted the media's attempts to impose a single figurehead upon the movement. Instead, leaders who proved their credibility on the ground organically emerged and were put forward by the people within the movement. This is very much in keeping with the historical record of traditional Black leadership. Folks are called to lead because they have something vital to contribute to the cause. They are granted conditional authority so long as they are accountable to the people and the people's interests. The moment they break that bond ("sell out," so to speak), their authority within pro-Black cultural spaces is revoked, even if white America continues to regard them as credible.

Nonprofit organizations are chock-full of talented, credible people who are overlooked or bypassed by decision makers—boards, donors—because of a perceived lack of executive-level experience or simply because they are not considered management material, when all they really mean is that they want someone like them at the helm. People in nonprofits are tired of this paternalistic attitude and condescending notion that the real talent must come from Wall Street or have a background in management consulting. They want people they respect—and they respect people who know, understand, and have preferably done their own work.

So, is the moral authority that people demand in their leaders and leadership structures being honored? This is the abiding leadership question that Black liberation movements present to the nonprofit sector. As long as the answer is *no*, leadership will continue to be contested.

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**3. The importance of trust.** The absence of trust that I have encountered in nonprofit organizations over the past two years is palpable and painful to witness. Leaders desperately want their people to believe in their intentions, and the people desperately want the organizations to grant them the space to do the work they feel called to do. The bottom-line issue is that as much as nonprofits talk about trusting their people and the community, their actions, ultimately, often don't align with what people expect from a trusting relationship.

In Black liberation movements, deep trust is “My word is my bond,” “Come hell or high water,” “Ride or die,” “Til the wheels fall off,” and the like. Trust is earned through actions, not words; deeds, not promises—hence the Black American adage, “show and prove.” Trust is so fragile and consequential because without it there is no movement. The Underground Railroad does not happen without trust. Nor does the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Nor does Selma. At its core, last year's blockbuster, *Judas and the Black Messiah*, is a story about broken trust within a Black liberation movement.<sup>11</sup>

Nonprofits would do well to take a play from the book of Barack. Black folks didn't flock to his side when he announced his candidacy back in 2007. He had to show and prove that he really understood both the struggle and the dream. Organizational leaders fretting about lost or lacking trust have to be patient and consistent. They have to accept that their mere existence does not entitle them to anything, especially from BIPOC staff and communities who have been repeatedly burned in the past. As uncomfortable as it may seem, nonprofits may just be in a state of trust limbo for a while.



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**4. Networks of mutuality.** Nonprofits are constantly trying to rally the troops to buy into a unified vision. They come up with cheesy slogans like “One Vision, One Org” that never resonate with BIPOC staff—or anyone, for that matter. *Oneness* is something that has to be asserted as an email tagline when it isn't genuinely felt. And it isn't genuinely felt when it is not true. Terms like “One Org” come off as insincere mottos crafted by those in charge to convince everyone else to fall in line under their benevolent leadership. Meanwhile, interdependence—what Dr. King called a “network of mutuality”—invests a sense of shared responsibility in the group. It understands that “whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” Mutuality and interdependence are, therefore, not tools of control and conformity; they are reminders that we have moral obligations to other people as we move through the world as independent beings.

If there is one lesson that Black liberation movements tell us repeatedly and without compromise, it is that Black folks don't want to be controlled. They want sovereignty over their lives, which means agency in their work—hence the significance of self-help and economic empowerment in Black political and economic history.

Many nonprofits talk about empowerment but are too top-heavy and process oriented to ever fulfill this aspiration. Instead, they tend to sap the possibility of spontaneous moral action from below. Inspired people are siloed into limiting job functions filled with busywork that both stretches

them thin and keeps them unfulfilled. The moment they dare to express an exciting idea is usually the moment the idea begins to die. Inevitably, it is met with internal gatekeepers whose job it is to politely kill creativity and redirect excess energy back onto largely meaningless tasks that keep the organization solvent but never solve the underlying issues it was set up to address.

Nonprofits have to figure out how to grant people who hunger to make a difference the individual agency that they crave—and, quite frankly, deserve—to fulfill the broader mission. That just isn't the case right now—not when so much emphasis is placed on managing people to meet sometimes arbitrary deadlines and goals that can then be distilled in a funder report. The concept of interdependence offers an alternative. In Black liberation traditions, movements are conduits for action. Anyone and everyone has both the responsibility and opportunity to take meaningful action to advance the cause in a given moment. The key, therefore, is not to control individual action through a phony appeal to oneness but to unleash collective action through individuals who are committed to the larger cause.

**5. People power.** In Black liberation movements, the people are the source of power. The people's will drives the mission. Without the people's consent and assent—which is earned through consistent, authentic engagement—there is no movement. Hence the Black Power phrase, “All power to the people.”

In striking contrast, too many nonprofits that claim to value their people treat those closest to the work like light bulbs: screw in, burn out, replace. That whole segments of the sector have come to rely on the low-wage labor of mostly Black and Brown people is a disgrace.

Relatedly, nonprofits are notoriously uncomfortable discussing power: who has it, how it exerts itself. Organizational leaders, particularly those who hold dominant identities, prefer to present as nonhierarchical, as just “one of the people.” This is not helpful. It is dishonest and disrespectful to those who know better—which is everyone.

What is needed and being called for at this moment is honesty. The phrase “Make it plain” entered the Black liberation movement lexicon by way of the Nation of Islam and Malcolm X.<sup>12</sup> He had a singular gift for truth telling that cut to the essence and connected with the soul of his audiences. Malcolm used allegory and metaphor as storytelling devices,

but he was plainspoken (not at all simplistic or dumbed down) and direct when it came to the message he was trying to convey, and the people loved him for that.

Nonprofit leaders need to learn how to speak forthrightly about power. Don't tell people that every option is on the table when that's not the case. Don't say that everyone's voice counts when some voices retain veto power. And if it is truly the case that power is shared and that everyone has a vote, negotiate what that means in practice. Then, live with the outcome.

**6. Resource sharing.** Resource hoarding and a scarcity mindset are prevailing features of rich nonprofits and foundations. In the name of prudent financial management, one underpays program staff and the other scrimps on operating costs while dodging long-term commitments. Foundations are fond of saying that they don't have enough money to solve the problems we face. This may be true, but what it amounts to is an invitation for nonprofits to duke it out. BIPOC folks in the sector see this and find it utterly reprehensible yet entirely in keeping with the way white dominance maintains its dominion.

As things stand, too many nonprofits that play in the same sandbox have now been conditioned to pretend that they alone in that sandbox are the solution. Even though they do the exact same work with the exact same population in the exact same locations, the leaders of these organizations act as if the others don't exist. By extension, they also don't partner with other social service agencies that could help them by reducing redundancies or providing their constituents with additional resources that are beyond their scope.

The conclusion I have drawn is that mutual recognition would lead to interrogating why so many organizations doing the same work operate in isolation. Instead, organizations fall or are pressured into a self-serving cycle: Because so-and-so are the only ones doing such-and-such critical work, donors, board members, and the general public must support them; otherwise, the work will not be done and an underserved population will be left stranded.

Black liberation movements never have the resources they need to address the problems their communities face. Similarly, Black- and Brown-led grassroots organizations rarely have access to resources comparable to their white counterparts. Yet, somehow they get it done anyway. They establish sharing economies—mutual aid societies, cooperative

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initiatives, sou-sous—whatever it takes. Resource sharing is not a sign of weakness or lack; it is an act of unity and solidarity. At different moments in time, we need things from each other, and we shouldn't be ashamed to ask.

One of the exciting outgrowths of the new wave of BIPOC leaders has been the development of informal communities of support that they have created. I discovered the existence of one such group in New York, when a new client told me I had been recommended through her network. These groups are as much therapy sessions as they are learning communities. As one Black leader told me in a recent catch-up, "Sometimes, I just need to be able to say something and have the person on the other end of the line understand without having to explain myself."

One can only dream that this model of resource sharing can become the norm in the future.

**7. Conflict as a source of creative energy.** Because nonprofit culture reflects and reinforces white, middle-class cultural modalities by default, it tends to be conflict averse. The norm in such spaces is to present as "nice" and "polite"—to smile and appear agreeable even when the situation is not. Conflict is viewed as a bad thing, a sign of dysfunction. The upshot is that people don't get the feedback they need to grow, feelings fester, and those who do express their feelings passionately—often Black folks—are portrayed as the problem.

Black liberation movements regard conflict as a necessary feature of struggle. Conflicting viewpoints—Du Bois versus Washington, King versus Malcolm—are a defining theme of Black liberation and, indeed, the Black experience. Conflict refines vision. Conflict susses out shortcomings and blind

**In Black liberation movements, knowledge gained through observation and experience isn't just anecdotal and supplemental; it is both essential and highly credible. The popular Maya Angelou quote, "When people show you who they are, believe them," is a perfect example.**

spots. Conflict ensures accountability. Conflict ensures that the ideas that best serve the collective interests are advanced. Nonprofits need to learn how to embrace conflict and view it not as a sign of deep problems or personal failings but rather of deep investment in the work. (I have written a book about this.)<sup>13</sup>

**8. Knowledge sharing, production, and validation.** In nonprofit organizations, knowledge is often held by people with positional power. It is dispensed to others as a reward for good conduct. In contrast, within Black liberation movements, knowledge both belongs to the community and is the community's responsibility to pass on to the next generation—thus the adage "each one teach one." In part because it was historically denied and in part because there is no guarantee that the knowledge holder will survive long enough to see the struggle through, it is essential that knowledge be shared, not held.

In nonprofit organizations, knowledge is only really valued if it can be validated by purportedly objective or independent analysis conducted in such a way that is consistent with the scientific method—the quintessential Enlightenment achievement. This in turn creates a dynamic wherein "research and data" teams within nonprofits become privileged spaces. Because of the sector's fixation on hierarchy and the assumption that "hard data" produced using

something that approximates the scientific method are superior, it invariably places more value on people who can perform those tasks. Within the nonprofit sector, those people tend to be highly educated and white. And while there has been a move of late to uplift lived experience—a concept born of Black feminism and scholarship—the jury is still out on if that actually translates beyond the good vibes it provides when it is uttered in a meeting.

A year ago, I facilitated a series of meetings with a group of BIPOC leaders. Early in our work together, a team of researchers provided a data presentation of their field: youth social services. For the past decade, these data have been the definitive source of information about that field for policy-makers, funders, and the public. When the researchers finished, let's just say things got spicy. *Who did you speak to to collect these data? When did you speak to them? What questions did you ask?* Fundamentally, the leaders felt that what was being presented about their communities did not reflect the reality of their communities. As we talked, we discovered that the sources the researchers had relied on were incredibly limited and skewed heavily toward respondents who could not possibly provide credible information about their communities. It was bad enough that these leaders of color left the meeting doubting the data that had been used to frame the issues pertinent to their field for a decade; what was worse, it only took a one-hour gathering of smart people with a different set of experiences to mortally wound a study that all of the experts—researchers, policy-makers, etc.—had rubber-stamped.

In Black liberation movements, knowledge gained through observation and experience isn't just anecdotal and supplemental; it is both essential and highly credible. The popular Maya Angelou quote, "When people show you who they are, believe them," is a perfect example of how Black liberation movements conduct knowledge validation. Angelou didn't have to perform an empirical study using the scientific method to arrive at this conclusion. Nor do those who intuitively understand and agree with the sentiment feel the need to verify her claims to knowledge through a social experiment; they know in their soul that she is right. They have lived conscious, reflective lives, and have drawn conclusions that don't require any further affirmation in order to stand as truth.

The point is that the nonprofit sector has to change the way knowledge is managed, who is considered an expert, and



what, ultimately, the aim of knowledge is if the sector hopes to play a meaningful role in the lives of those it purports to represent.

## V. THE SECTOR'S NEXT ITERATION IS ALREADY TAKING SHAPE

You may be thinking that this is all well and good, but movements aren't the same as organizations. My response is twofold. In one sense, it is a strange thing that we cling to this notion that our political lives—our values and beliefs about how the world should and does work—are severable from our work lives. Through our work in the world, we not only earn our keep but also express who we are and what we care about. How can that not be political? Who decided that those two aims must operate in discrete, non-overlapping lanes? In another sense, inasmuch as movements aren't the same as organizations, human service organizations aren't businesses, either. Yet that doesn't stop armies of management consultants from trying to make nonprofits operate as such.

Truth is, nonprofits have always been something else. If we are to be really honest with one another, they were at least arguably conceived as tax dodges for the wealthy.<sup>14</sup> Only in the past four decades have they wedged themselves into the massive gaps left by government austerities, corporate greed, and gross inequality.<sup>15</sup> As such, many of us have spent our careers solving problems that we didn't create. We didn't disinvest in Black and Brown neighborhoods or underfund schools. We are just the ones who have to find our students resources so that they can succeed. The nonprofit sector has become the social stopgap, humanity's buffer—what keeps civil society from completely unraveling. To do our work—especially in a nation that scorns us because it needs us and that need reminds it of its imperfections—we have learned to adapt to ever-changing funding priorities, tax policies, community needs, and political tides.

But what if this is our moment to try something radically different? To push instead of being pushed around?

Two years ago, we all saw behind the veil. We saw what we had wrought, and we vowed to change. Now we are being coaxed back into complacency. There is no other way to say it. DEI work has stalled or is being walked back in many places, because the sector mastered the lingo but ultimately has been unwilling to adopt ways of knowing, being,

and understanding the world that Black folks have relied on for centuries to effect lasting change for themselves and others. In the last one hundred and fifty years alone, Black liberation movements delivered the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments, *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965—to name just a few crucial advances everyone now benefits from. Had our movements not been undermined, maimed, and betrayed, we surely would have delivered more. Yet and still, the social sector continues to overlook the ideas, beliefs, and values that had to be in place in order for such incredible aspirations to be realized in the face of such unyielding resistance. Instead, we are told that focusing on race is too narrow or exclusionary—hogwash conjured to conceal a truth right before our eyes.

Luckily, some of us haven't forgotten what was revealed two years ago—and those voices are trying desperately to keep the sector on task: *to be what it promised*. Those who wield power can choose to hear the challenge being issued as a *call-out* or as a *call-forward*. What is inarguable is that the sector's next iteration is already taking shape. Organizations that resist the emergent order will atrophy in time. Organizations that adapt to the new demands of people with a new consciousness have a chance to survive. But to do so, they will need to experiment, play with new structural forms, embrace new modes of working—ones that center the needs of the people who do, and are closest to, the work—and allow autonomous decisioning as a norm. Above all, they will need to reinvigorate themselves with the spirit of resistance and radical love that the Black freedom movements—to which this sector owes so much—have taught are essential to change.




## NOTES

1. David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021).
2. See for instance Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997).
3. These critiques came about via Native American experience of the French in Canada, as well as from Native American travel to France (from Canada and from what is now called the United States) in the 1700s. See Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*.
4. The first wave of these stories (early 1700s) originated from back-and-forth exchanges that took place in North America and France. The authors encountered Native Americans in Montreal, and Native Americans visited France. Later generations (later 1700s) of these stories were based on and heavily influenced by the first generation, but by then they were typically purely fictionalized by the European authors. See *ibid.*, 53–59.
5. *Ibid.*, 17.
6. *Ibid.*, 62.
7. *Ibid.*, 61.
8. See “Frederick Douglass Project: Jay Thompson’s Essay ‘Toward Douglassian Abolitionism: The Rift Between Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison,’” in “Letters,” University of Rochester Frederick Douglass Project, [rbscp.lib.rochester.edu/2842](http://rbscp.lib.rochester.edu/2842).
9. Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 382.
10. Black Americans do not inhabit this domain of experience exclusively, but because my experience and expertise rest in Black American traditions, I am lifting up that worldview in this essay. For more on Black epistemologies, see Caroline Shenaz Hossein, “A Black Epistemology for the Social and Solidarity Economy: The Black Social Economy,” *The Review of Black Political Economy* 46, no. 3 (September 2019): 209–229; and Patricia Hill Collins, “Black Feminist Epistemology,” in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1999), 251–6, 266–71.
11. *Judas and the Black Messiah*, directed by Shakra King, written by Shakra King, Will Berson, Kenny Lucas, and Keith Lucas (Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Pictures, 2021).
12. *Malcolm X: Make it Plain*, directed by Orlando Bagwell, written by Steve Fayer and Orlando Bagwell, *American Experience*, PBS.org, January 26, 1994, [pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/malcolmX/](http://pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/malcolmX/).
13. Dax-Devlon Ross, *The Nightmare and the Dream: Nas, Jay-Z and the History of Conflict in African-American Culture* (New York: Outside the Box Publishing, 2008).
14. Kelsey Piper, “The charitable deduction is mostly for the rich. A new study argues that’s by design.,” Vox, September 3, 2019, [vox.com/future-perfect/2019/9/3/20840955/charitable-deduction-tax-rich-billionaire-philanthropy](http://vox.com/future-perfect/2019/9/3/20840955/charitable-deduction-tax-rich-billionaire-philanthropy).
15. Andrew Paniello, “5 Things That Have Been Causing The Nonprofit Sector To Grow,” Blog, Ally 360, February 5, 2018, [ally360.com/5-things-causing-nonprofit-sector-grow/](http://ally360.com/5-things-causing-nonprofit-sector-grow/).

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