

In the Time of the Right:
Reflections on Liberation

Second Edition

By Suzanne Pharr

READING & DISCUSSION GUIDE

Renée DeLapp and Christian Matheis

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This guide provides a series of questions that will lead you through an analysis of the tactics used to dominate and marginalize communities through the use of race, gender, sexuality, and economic exploitation – and the strategies we can use to foster social justice for all. These questions focus on the social and political conscience that we gain by spending time in both self-reflection and community dialogue regarding our most precious values and our most pressing problems.

Chapter 1: “The Rise of the Right”

1. As you read and reflect on the year-by-year timeline, what are some of the patterns you notice? What are the strategies and frameworks used by the Right to establish authoritarian control?
2. Pharr asks readers to “... reflect and look back on the past few decades or so to events that foreshadowed our current political environment. Each of our own experiences contains political truth. Sometimes we do not comprehend its meaning until there is a critical mass of information and we can recognize the linkages.” (23). What are the linkages you recall from your own life? What are the critical pieces of information that help you understand how the Right has, as Pharr puts it, “... implemented a comprehensive agenda in a piecemeal fashion” (24)?
3. Within the Family Protection Act of 1981 are proposals that may seem familiar today. When the 1981 bill was

not passed, the Right “vowed to break it into separate pieces and pass it piece by piece in the years to come. They put the country on notice and then set out to accomplish the task” (26). What factors made that promise a reality? The Family Protection Act technically failed, but what did the Right do to achieve the same goals in the long run?

4. What does the current presence of tech billionaires as players on the electoral scene mean? Where do billionaires fit in the political landscape?
5. What does it mean if the Right labels journalists and the free press as “the enemy of the state/people” and accurate reporting and dissemination of information is eliminated or seriously limited?

Chapter 2: “Domination Politics”

1. It is offered that critical thinking is “the most important skill for the pursuit of freedom, equality, and justice, and the greatest enemy of authoritarianism” (43). Can you have effective critical thinking without valid information, political education, and a wide variety of choices?
2. What values are embodied in “domination politics”? In other words, what values are you expressing if you uphold politics of domination as described in this book?
3. What do everyday people need to do to resist the politics of domination? What kind of political education, skills, and/or community support do people need in order to understand and exercise power as individuals, in a collective, and at an institutional level?
4. Imagination challenge: What would your community, county, state, country, etc. be like if people did not support domination politics?

5. Pharr explains how some groups experience economic exploitation, some groups experience oppression, and some groups experience both economic exploitation and oppression. The Right has used the politics of domination to pit these groups against one another, especially through using their influence over the economy to drive a wedge between groups. How could we have organized differently if we all had a stronger understanding of economic exploitation? How can we use a better understanding of economic exploitation and economic equity to organize for liberation today?
6. People sometimes refer to the U.S. as the “belly of the beast” in terms of capitalism, militarism, and other global influences, inferring that we are so deep in we can’t get an accurate picture of what is happening. Thinking back over your life and your understanding of capitalism, socialism, etc., what formal education did you encounter that helped you make sense of these and other political systems? What kinds of educational experiences help you evaluate the mechanics of each system and the relative costs and benefits for you and the people and things you care most about? What must you believe in order to support capitalism? Do the facts support that belief?
7. The Right has a long history of attacking state and federal benefits. What does it mean that nearly all social services and societal support mechanisms are paid for not by the state but by employee taxes and employee contributions? What happens to our social fabric when the cost of benefits sourced from the workplace is increasingly borne by individuals? Who stands to benefit? Who stands to suffer?
8. Pharr discusses how, at the time this book was originally written, there were moves by the Right to limit how and when nonprofits could lobby and

influence legislation. What will happen if the Right succeeds and moves to decertify unfavored nonprofits and declare them terrorist organizations? What does this mean for unrepresented and marginalized voices, especially given the rise of corporate influence over elections and politics in general?

9. Has imprisonment changed over time in terms of who is punished and what goes unpunished? To what do you attribute changes in imprisonment and criminalization? How does the expansion of police funding and growth following September 11, 2001 and the Patriot Act of 2001 operate within this understanding? Why does the Right want more things criminalized?
10. Pharr proposes that “capitalism, in its current international, unchecked movement, no longer needs public schools to provide a large, educated, skilled workforce” (57–58). What evidence do you see for and/or against this proposition? If this is true, have you seen signs of disinvestment in public schools? How has it affected you and your family or community, and what concerns does it raise for our future?
11. Often, the Right targets the most vulnerable communities and vilifies them as the cause of economic decline and political unrest. In many cases, Pharr explains, the broader public can be told to believe certain groups are problematic once authority figures use a disconcertingly familiar phrase: “enemies of the people” (62). Who or what are currently promoted by the Right as “enemies of the people”?
12. A key piece of the work for liberation is to help more people understand how societal change occurs and how to identify it when we see it. Pharr argues that “individual ambition and reward are mistaken for social change” because the power is “given” rather than “won” (70). In her view, collective shared power is

what brings social change. Should social change be centered on the success of charismatic individual leaders or on collective work? Defend your position.

Chapter 3: “The Right and Their Agenda”

1. Pharr states, “as problems become extreme, extreme solutions become palatable” (98). In what ways do you see right-wing “solutions” eliminating your choices rather than expanding them?
2. In discussing characteristics of authoritarian movements, Pharr notes that fascism – so much in the news today – could be defined as involving “a combination of nationalism, militarism, racism, charismatic leadership, populism, and religiosity or sense of heroic destiny, with an emphasis on law and order, discipline, ultra-patriotism, patriarchal families, and hierarchical institutions” (100). And “[fascism] is born out of chaos and disorder, emerging at the point when people are afraid and angry and are seeking survival through the creation of order at any cost” (100). In your state and local communities, what are some examples of right-wing actors using order and/or chaos to gain control?
3. The Right gains social control by building new antagonisms and exploiting preexisting divisions. Why is this strategy so effective at gaining and maintaining control? What can we do to break the cycle of division and antagonism?
4. Pharr explains how corporations partner with the theocratic Right – one destabilizes economic conditions while the other claims to offer the solution as the cleanup crew. This clears the way for privatization and religion-dominated (formerly public) institutions. What are some of the ways we can enhance our local and

state public institutions to protect them from this kind of takeover?

5. Misinformation is a key strategy used by the Right to undermine democracy and shared public institutions. For example, the myth of scarcity is used to undermine and dismantle a fair system of taxation in which corporations and the wealthy pay their fair share. How do you see the myth of scarcity and other forms of misinformation about taxes impacting you and your community?
6. How are workers in your state organized? Are there labor movements organizing for safe and fair working conditions? Are labor rights safe and secure in your state, or are they under attack?
7. Why does the Right target public schools, including teachers, books, curriculum, and funding? What are some of the ways people in your community are working to keep public schools safe and open to all children?
8. Pharr says, “Recognition of the early signs of fascism allows the possibility of offering an alternative vision of how people can act together to seek answers for creating order from economic and social justice, not the injustice of scapegoating and repression ... we can build on the idea of being generous and inclusive, of being tolerant, good neighbors who enjoy both individual rights and mutual responsibility. In this atmosphere, fascism cannot thrive” (100). Where do you see opportunities to expand that vision?

Chapter 4: “Homophobia and Racism: Strategies of Division”

1. “Difference becomes viewed as a liability and is perceived as a deliberate act – an affront to the dominant group,” asserts Pharr (112). How do you

reconcile the desire/need to belong with the desire/need to be an authentic and whole individual? How can we balance the two?

2. If cultural norms are established and reinforced (and sometimes attacked and dismantled) by institutions and those with political and economic influence, how does historical misinformation and disinformation play a role? If people are not fully represented in the groups that make the rules and establish the norms, should they merely play by the rules and comply with the norms? If not, what should they do?
3. Do you think the Right seeks control over only women's bodies? Why is controlling women's bodies central to authoritarianism? How is the attack on non-binary and transgender people deeply connected to the attack on women?
4. What does the current concept of "bodily autonomy" mean within your lived experience and that of those you care about? What do you envision as the logical terminus of control over women's bodies? Is there one? What does this control serve in a context of domination?
5. Where does a (mis)understanding of transgender, non-binary, and other queer lives figure into the bodily autonomy assault?
6. The 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution guarantees of equal rights of citizenship to those born in its geographic boundaries. Citizenship is considered a birthright rather than something to be earned. What are your thoughts on the assaults on the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the disenfranchisement of those convicted of a felony, and the notion that equal protection is a "special right" to be earned?
7. If federal law is the "floor" of rights, how is it that a

federal Equal Rights Amendment has not been passed despite half a century of advocacy, and what is the implication of its absence in these times? Why is it a threat?

8. Pharr posits that our only hope for an inclusive world lies in joining our efforts and that to accomplish this we need to be able to recognize “how oppressions and oppressed people are linked – and then how this linkage necessitates mutual solutions” (126). What do you think about this proposition? What effect does this linkage have on identity politics?
9. What hope is there for liberation if identity groups (women, queer, transgender, BIPOC, unionists, etc.) are divided along lines of gender, race, and economics? How can we teach and demonstrate that all oppressions are connected and that our freedoms depend upon the understanding and liberation work based on that connectedness? Give examples.

Chapter 5: “Reflections on Liberation”

1. What does it mean to have a full share of the rights and responsibilities of living in a socially just society? Give some examples of what that socially just world would look like.
2. What are the values promoted by those who use the politics of domination, and how do the values of the politics of liberation differ?
3. Pharr explains that “the work of liberation politics is to change hearts and minds, develop empathy with and sympathy for other people, and help each other discover how we are inextricably linked together for our common good and our survival on this planet” (136). How do you see yourself in this work? What roles do you want to play in liberation politics?

4. How can we engage in political education that goes beyond developing ideas to also engage in developing people who are strong, knowledgeable, and courageous enough to take on the work of economic and social justice?
5. Where have you seen (or can you imagine) political education that resulted in individual and/or collective action for social justice? What takes you from knowledge to action? What do you think makes others take action?
6. Why is it necessary to question the assumptions that come from our unearned privilege, and how does this help to foster genuine friendship and the bonds of common humanity? What does it mean to spend one's privilege? Give examples.
7. Pharr asks, "Should we have a society that uses its resources for the common good or a two-tiered society with increased economic stratification and poverty?" (176). She describes the difference between the politics of inclusion and sharing and the politics of exclusion and selfishness. What do you think helps communities shift from politics of exclusion to politics of inclusion?
8. Why are storytelling and other forms of cultural work crucial for social justice movements? What is it about cultural work that helps us create a community of belonging and connection with one another?