

# Social Change Conversations for Activists and Classrooms

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A Companion Study Guide to

*Transformation: Toward a People's Democracy*  
*Essays and Speeches by Suzanne Pharr*



## A Study Guide for Political Education and Movement Work

*Transformation: Toward a People's Democracy* (2021) is a movement book for anyone working for an expansive vision of social justice. Here Suzanne Pharr offers a clear and compelling vision for action amid social and political turmoil. Drawing on decades of work on the frontlines of social movements, Pharr's writings create a real-time chronicle of on-the-ground organizing and the historical significance of struggles for freedom and democracy.

Pharr, a Southern queer feminist and anti-racist organizer, explores the pitfalls and the strengths within social justice movements. Her writings reflect the interchange of ideas and the collective work of thinkers and organizers who led activists to lift up the liberation of gender and sexuality, to fight both domestic and state violence, to advance anti-racist strategies and the leadership of people of color, to work against the advancement of rapacious capitalism, and to confront the rise of the Right in all of its forms.

*Transformation* examines not just what happened but how it happened in the battles against numerous forms of oppression including economic injustice, racism, sexism, heterosexism, transphobia, and nationalism. Taken together, Pharr's writings give students, activists, and scholars a way to understand decades of attacks on civil rights while offering a roadmap that shows the way toward a people's democracy where everyone has full participation, voice, a fair share of the benefits, justice, and dignity.

The experience and insight Pharr shares in *Transformation* originates in the 1980s in organized efforts to end gender violence for women of all races and classes, and expands to address the intersections of many other forms of systemic injustice. Pharr's telling of this *movement work* helps illustrate the importance of a *political education* that arises out of shared conversation and consciousness raising, from the time and energy we dedicate one another in storytelling, strategizing, cultural work, and in many other ways.

The essays in *Transformation* can help readers build their political education by deepening our individual and collective understanding of the different forms of institutional, cultural, and interpersonal power that impact our lives. As a guide to political education, the text asks us to consider key themes such as community, collectivism, dignity, strategy, domination, and liberation.

The study guide focuses on a selection of essays from the overall book. The questions lead you through analysis of the tactics used to dominate and marginalize communities through the use of race, gender, 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 about our most precious values and our most pressing problems.

**“Divisions that Kill: The Enemy Without and Within”  
(1992)**

1. Why does the Theocratic Right try to portray people of color, feminists and those in the LGBTQ+ community as those who are to blame for social chaos and the breakdown of society? How did this idea spread through society at large? What is the continuation of it today?
2. In what ways did the development of the progressive social justice movement affect the building of the rightwing movement? How are social justice and rightwing backlash interrelated?
3. Why has the Right been obsessed with sex for the past 40 years (and more)? Why hasn't the Right focused on economic injustice and poverty, healthcare, child mortality, etc.?
4. Pharr argues that “male domination could not survive if all people were granted fully supported choice and self-determination over their lives.” Do you agree/disagree with this—and why? What does this mean for you and your life?
5. What are the divisions in our liberation movements? Who benefits from these divisions? What are the ways we can overcome them?

**“The Battle for Public Schools”  
(1994)**

1. The creation of a public school system and education available to all has been a key part of this country’s work toward democracy. Why are high quality public schools critically important? What do we lose when public education is diminished?
2. The attack on public schools has been a through-line for decades, beginning before the civil rights movement and increasing ever since. Why does the Right expect to gain by ending public education? What does our society lose?
3. How do economic patterns and needs affect the growth or diminishment of public education?
4. How did the Right manage to gain so much influence over public schools, and the way public schools operate?
5. What are ways our social movements can engage in defending, protecting and building quality public education for all?

**“Violence in Houston”  
(1992)**

1. How does the Right’s national (and global) agenda of bigotry and discrimination foster a climate of violence? How are the political agenda and the escalation of violence against marginalized people connected?
2. Notice the different patterns of involvement by police and military personnel. What are some of the common threads in these moments, and do you witness similar patterns in the world today?
3. What were some of the different strategies and tactics used by Pharr and others throughout the events in Houston? What kinds of strategies and tactics would you use in your communities to oppose rightwing efforts, and what are some of the local organizations that provide training in organizing methods?
4. How has the Right taken over many law enforcement and military organizations, and how do you think your community can diminish or abolish the dominance of armed and militarized agents?
5. Thinking about the relationship between the theocratic Right and the Political Right, how has this coalition co-opted (stolen) the language of “morality”? How can your community reclaim and revitalize the language of morality to empower one another?
6. How are exclusion, violence, and domination connected? How are they more than just words, but rather a coordinated form of attack on social welfare, values, morality, and systematically marginalized communities?

## **Violence Against Women**

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### **“The Battered Women’s Movement: A Brief Retrospective – and a Call for Action” (1990)**

1. The women’s anti-violence movement benefited from broad, grassroots, shared leadership in the 1970s and then became highly professionalized in the 1980s and since. That is, women’s anti-violence work became less about grassroots community change and more the work of credentialed social workers and counselors working in public agencies and non-profit organizations. What do you think has been gained or lost as a result of this shift toward professionalization?
2. What is the importance of changing the language and understanding of “domestic violence” and relational violence” to newer terms like “gender violence”?
3. What do you think about the importance of storytelling and consciousness raising? If telling one’s story in a group is critical to understanding and building an analysis and strategy for ending gender violence today, what methods would you use to bring people of different identities together to share their stories? What would motivate them to attend and speak?
4. What strategies do you think we need today to end gender violence? What are the major barriers to ending gender violence?
5. What shifts in our culture related to gender violence do you witness? What brought them about?

## **Violence Against Women**

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### **“White Male Supremacy: Hate, Bias, and Discrimination” (1991)**

1. What is the difference between the attacks by organized groups such as the Klan versus those individuals who carry the hatred found in our culture? In other words, what is the difference between those who organize around overt, blatant hatred and those who consider hatred an “opinion”? Is it important to separate the two?
2. What is systemic oppression? How do institutions in our society support and even perpetuate biased violence?
3. Do you believe women should be protected as targets of biased violence in the same way that people of color, religious minorities, and members of the LGBTQA+ community are? What is your argument for either yes or no position?
4. How is male supremacy (and behavior) related to white supremacy?
5. Economics, race and gender are three major pillars of oppression. In what ways are these intertwined?
6. What steps, large and small, can be taken to transform a climate of violence?

## **Violence Against Women**

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### **“Why the Women’s Project Would Support a New Trial for a Convicted Rapist – And an Introduction to the Women’s Watchcare Network” (1989)**

1. How does the case of Barry Lee Fairchild demonstrate the complexity of intersectionality? Should one oppression trump another? How do we maintain solidarity when one form of oppression appears worse than other forms, and this risks pitting us against one another?
2. Do you agree with the decision to support a rapist to have a fair trial? What do the rest of us gain by guaranteeing a fair trial for someone who committed a terrible act?
3. In the Women’s Watchcare Network, each oppressed group (women, queers, people of color, religious minorities) was seen through an intersectional lens. How does this help one come to understand biased violence as a whole?
4. What was the advantage of asking church women to lead the Women’s Watchcare Network?
5. Why was it crucial to document and report on gender violence when women were not included in the Hate Crimes Act? What about the documentation made it compelling?
6. How are the major issues of race, gender, and economics, as well as other oppressions linked together in the hate crimes that occur related to gender, race, sexuality, and religion?



**“The Wolf at the Door”  
(1993)**

1. What risk did the religious Right face when it decided to win over communities of color and get them to unite against issues that, in the end, would hurt those communities? Have you seen them be successful recently with any racially defined groups, esp in getting them to be in opposition to each other?
2. What are the specific ways that you have seen people of color falsely blamed for the majority of crime in the country and for hurting our economy? Why did the Right choose those two categories, crime and economy, as leverage in their attacks on people of color?
3. How did the Right create a negative view of multiculturalism to convince people of color to reject it—when it actually benefited them?
4. What were the Right’s goals in demonizing and opposing immigrants in this country? What does the Right hope to gain by attacking immigrants and refugees?
5. What is the basis of the Right’s argument that if queers get rights, it will take rights away from people of color?

**“The Mercurial Face of Covert Racism”  
(1988)**

1. What are examples of covert racism in our universities?
2. Are covert and overt racism equally harmful? In what ways should we address both?
3. Name some examples of covert racism you have witnessed? How did it compare to the overt racism you have seen? And was it easy or difficult to get the person or persons to accept and act to change it?
4. People talk a lot about “empowerment.” Is it possible to empower individuals or, given the right conditions, do people empower themselves? Can empowerment be gifted? What are some other concepts or frameworks for understanding power that might work better than empowerment?
5. Imagine what it would be like if people of color had fair representation and a fair share of power at all levels of society and governance. What kinds of changes do you imagine that would bring about?

**“Racist Politics and Homophobia”  
(1993)**

1. Why does the Right want to overthrow the gains of the Civil Rights Movement? What are civil rights a threat to the Right?
2. The Right has a history of going into white churches with the message that African Americans are taking something away from whites, and also going into Black churches and saying the LGBTQA+ community is taking something from African Americans. What makes this strategy—“if they get theirs, yours will become less”—so effective?
3. Why is the claim that “homosexuality is a choice and exists mostly among white people” so powerful in the argument that the Right makes in Black churches?
4. Have you seen positive change happen in the relationship between the Black and queer communities? Is it possible the strategy didn’t work?
5. What has been the impact of the growing visibility and leadership of queers of color?

**“The Oregon Campaign”  
(1993)**

1. How did the rightwing’s Oregon campaign fit into its larger agenda?
2. How have the tactics used by the Right in Oregon continued into their current campaigns today?
3. What are examples of ways that our campaigns against the Right can build toward a multi-racial, multi-gendered democracy?
4. What examples do you witness today of the Right controlling the public agenda regarding queer and Trans people, and the broader LGBTQA+ community?
5. The Right frames the conflict they have produced as a “cultural war.” What are the cultural ways we can succeed in changing the culture to one of inclusivity, fairness, justice, and peace?

**“Building a Lesbian and Gay Liberation Movement”  
(1990)**

1. “Liberating work is that which resists oppression, gives it a face and, from a place of group power, transforms the world. Domesticating work is that which enables us to adapt to an oppressive world, to adapt to it.” What movement work have we done in the past—or now—that is domesticating? What work do we need to do that is liberating?
2. What has been the effect of calling homosexuality a “sin” or “sickness”? In what ways have we eliminated the toxic power of those words?
3. What are the ways that women’s liberation and queer/Trans liberation are connected? What do we lose when we treat them as separate oppressions?
4. Some would say the women’s movement has done a better job of taking on queer issues than the queer movement has fought for women. What is your assessment?
5. What is your assessment of how we have succeeded in expanding the definition of gender since this article was written in 1990? How much—and in what ways—has that expansion moved us toward liberation?

**“From Welfare Queens to Gay Marriage: the Path to  
Compulsory Heterosexual Marriage”  
(2006)**

1. Does the definition of family as we now know it move us toward liberation? What within its definition holds us back?
2. Does the Right focus on queer marriage as a critical issue today? If so, what form does it take? If not, why not?
3. Many people think that winning the right to marry has “normalized” queer people. Has it pushed us forward toward radical change in the definition of family and relationships, or has the result been domestication of queers into family units similar to heterosexuals?
4. What effect has the rapid rise of queer marriages been on queers who do not marry? Have married queers benefitted more? And has it increased their standing in society?
5. If you had a choice now, would you spend millions on a fight for queer marriage, or for a new social contract that benefitted everyone, inclusive of diverse family arrangements?
6. Marriage had great meaning for many queer people at the turn of the 21st century—what issue do you think would bring passion and fire now to the queer community at large?

## **Movement Work and Multi-Issue Politics**

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### **“Multi-Issue Politics” (1994)**

1. How are economic and social injustice seemingly inextricably linked? How are economic exploitation and oppression based on identities connected? How could the knowledge of this linkage change our work for social change?
2. Today, many social justice groups still organize around identity, even a small slice of identity within a large identification. What are the advantages/disadvantages of organizing around identity groups?
3. Is there any advantage to having diversity without having shared power? What are examples?
4. Why is it critical to include economic analysis along with analyses of race and gender? What successes are actually possible if we try to eliminate racism and gender oppression without also eliminating economic injustice? What do we gain if we connect the elimination of economic exploitation with the work to dismantle racism and gender oppression?
5. How has the Right been successful in dividing oppressed groups? What are examples you have witnessed? What in our society favors their success.

## **Vision, Hope, and Moving Forward**

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### **“Reflections on Individual Change vs. Systems Change” (1991)**

1. Why is it crucial to pay close attention to economic aspects of oppression?
2. How did some progressive social movements become conservative as the Right cut back and/or eliminated government programs that benefit the working class?
3. What are systems change and group solutions, and how does systems change differ from individual changes in our thinking and behavior?
4. What is consciousness raising, and how do consciousness raising groups help to ground and expand movement work?
5. How do government programs and non-profit organizations take over or disrupt community-based movement work?
6. How has the shift away from grassroots organizing toward individual solutions such as therapy and personalized counseling influenced movements for social justice?
7. What are some basic skills we need in order to think and organize in terms of systems change?
8. What would it be like if we all had access to both a vibrant community concerned with social justice and excellent counseling resources?
9. Pharr argues that movement work can become fractured, lacking in leadership, and lacking in vision because we have few models for the world we want to create. Where can we find models to help us decide the kind of world we want to live in?



## **Vision, Hope, and Moving Forward**

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### **“Reflections on Liberation” (1996)**

1. What does it mean to have a full share of the rights and responsibilities of living in a socially just society?
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.” 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 for economic and social justice?
5. 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?
6. Pharr describes the difference between the politics of inclusion and sharing and the politics of exclusion and selfishness. She asks, “Should we have a society that uses its resources for the common good or a two-tiered society with increased economic inequality and poverty?” What do you think helps communities shift from a politics of exclusion to a politics of inclusion?
7. What are storytelling and other forms of cultural work crucial for social justice movements? What is it about cultural work that helps undermine domination politics and the divide-and-conquer strategies used by the Right?

## **About the Author**

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Suzanne Pharr is an organizer and political strategist who has spent her adult life working to build a broad-based, multi-racial, multi-issued movement for social and economic justice in the United States. She founded the Women's Project in Arkansas in 1981, was a co-founder of Southerners on New Ground in 1984, and was director of the Highlander Center from 1999 to 2004. After six decades of working across movements, Pharr now thinks of herself as a political handywoman, engaging with activists of diverse races, genders, sexual identities, classes, ages, abilities, and cultures to develop strategies for justice and equality.

Learn more at [www.SuzannePharr.com](http://www.SuzannePharr.com)