

Noah Schurr

Theory of Understanding – Theory of Social Change

In thinking about social change there are so many different dimensions to consider, that to try and narrow one dimension down as the most significant is challenging and runs the risk of oversimplifying change and oppression. Developing an understanding of intersectionality is key, as before one can strategize about causing effective social change, one must recognize that systems of oppression are interconnected; They intersect, reinforce, and reproduce each other, deepening inequities and causing overlapping harm. This recognition caused me to have two conflicting feelings: a feeling of pessimism that these systems of oppression are too entrenched and interconnected for effective and significant change to take place, and a feeling of optimism that by recognizing the interconnectedness of these systems and acting on crucial opportunities, effective change can take place that can help not only the direct beneficiaries but also other groups and by doing so serve to challenge large systems of oppression.

My response to these two conflicting feelings led me to think about social change in two different ways primarily. My first conception of social change is my response to pessimistic feeling of a lack of control, and it is personal change within the way you think and act. In response to feeling a sense of powerlessness, it is important for me to remember that I have agency in my life and can reflect on and change my thoughts and actions. This type of change takes place internally and is reflected in your daily interactions. This type of social change—which is heavily reflection based—can serve to change how you contribute to the socialization of others, develop a more advanced awareness of how you think, and alter how

you conceptualize and operate in your other social change work. Internal change is inherently heavily reflexive, as it entails self-education and unlearning, which involves questioning what you know and how you know it. I used to sometimes question the validity of this type of social change, as I felt like it was too self centered, and bordered on performativity (I felt this more when this was the only type of social change work I was engaged with). However, one concept that really helped me feel the significance of this type of work was the idea of emergence and fractals, from adrienne maree brown. A simple version of emergence is that it is the way complex systems and patterns emerge out of relatively simple interactions. A simple version of fractals is that there are infinitely complex patterns that are self-similar across different scales, and that how things are at the small scale is how things become at the larger scale. These patterns emerge at all levels, and all levels of these patterns are significant, so I believe it is my responsibility as someone working towards social change to try and change the patterns I have agency over. It also deepened and made clearer for me the relationship between this intrapersonal type of social change and my other conception of social change.

My other understanding of social change is maybe a more traditional understanding, predicated on the idea that all systems of oppression are connected, and by changing certain systems you can have the potential to intensely effect others. There are many powerful, deeply ingrained, and global systems of oppression such as racism, sexism, and capitalism, that even when holding this view the prospect of changing all of them can feel farfetched and impossible. I believe strongly in a housing first model of social change, which is not an assertion that treating housing as a right and removing it from the speculative market will eliminate other oppressive systems like the ones mentioned prior. Housing first to me means two things:

Primarily, that housing is one of the most fundamental human rights, and that in order to improve a person or group's life and health outcomes, everyone must have equitable and secure access to housing first before trying to provide them with other services. My other conception of housing first is specific to the United States of America, due to my belief that residential segregation is the most key factor in general inequality in the country, and more specifically in the wealth gap. I believe that the solution to fixing our oppressive housing system is to remove housing from the speculative market entirely in our country, allowing public housing to meaningfully compete with the private market, and creating the environment necessary for secure and equitable access to housing as a right. While these goals are themselves grand and difficult to accomplish, they are far more achievable to me than completely shedding our system of global capitalism or ending white supremacy entirely. I also sincerely believe that if these goals were accomplished, it would have major impacts on inequalities and systems of oppression that affect many more groups than just low-income people.

My positionality and life experiences have led me to prioritize housing work specifically, and will inform how I approach my work. Growing up across the street from a large affordable housing project with heavily concentrated poverty, housing insecurity, and over policing, while attending school in a highly wealthy neighborhood, helped me develop my understanding of intersectionality and housing as an essential right. Due to my experiences in activist spaces and the positionality of my identities, I feel that the two areas I can be most effective in making change are policy advocacy, and internal change from stakeholder organizations within the housing system. I have some background in policy advocacy and feel that the connection

between policy changes and systemic changes are clear, and I believe—a belief stemming from my understanding of emergence and fractals—that radically changing the practices of an organization can change the practices of an industry, which can significantly alter systems. It will take significant advancements in both areas and extensive collaboration and collective efforts to change the housing system in the way I believe it needs. My focus on policy and stakeholder organizations is not to say that I believe policy makers and stakeholder organizations hold the knowledge necessary to change the housing system. I believe that some of the most important funds of knowledge to draw on to solve the housing crisis are knowledge coming from unhoused people and people living in affordable housing. I think true and deep participation in social change efforts by all stakeholders involved in housing is a necessary condition for this change to occur.

I don't expect that I will be able to change these systems in the ways I have mentioned by myself or even necessarily in my lifetime. I firmly believe that change on this scale will require collective collaboration for decades to come, complete with both personal change and attempts at large scale systemic change. The synthesis of personal change and systemic change, seemingly two opposite ends of a spectrum, is necessary for change work to be effective. My goal is to contribute to this process as much as possible, to try and help reframe how we as a country conceptualize housing and our housing system, and alter the realities that are burdening millions. Change is constant and unstoppable, and it is our duty as activists and humans to guide that change in the direction of equity, with a radical imagination about what the world will look like the more change occurs.