

A PATHWAY TO EFFECTIVE ACTIVISM: REPLACING CHARITY AND EQUALITY WITH JUSTICE AND EQUITY

ABSTRACT

Charity and equality, two concepts that have been widely adopted in addressing different forms of disparity in communities, need to be rejected and removed from the models we employ to defend the most vulnerable. An overreliance on charity normalizes the existence of injustice; it actively allows suffering to become entrenched in social systems. Similarly, social movements that rely on equality proceed under the presumption that our communities are already equal, ignoring the need for equity-based activism. Using an analysis of homelessness in Vancouver, the Vancouver Tenants Union's staunch defence of Vancouver's working class, my involvement in leading the Marpole Students for Modular Housing movement, and my role as president of the provincial non-profit organization Kitchen on a Mission, this paper explores the need to transition to a justice-based model for activism: changing dysfunctional systems instead of offering relief while working within them. This paper also argues that to effectively deal with homelessness in Vancouver, we need to reach a collective understanding that real social change requires the most privileged to take a step back and make space.

"Keep your coins. I want change."

– Banksy

On January 30th, 2019, billionaires Warren Buffet, Jeff Bezos, and Jamie Dimon announced a joint initiative to ameliorate the incessantly increasing, unsustainable cost of healthcare in the United States by creating "solutions that benefit [their] US employees, their families and, potentially, all Americans" (Isidore, 2018). Three billionaires, collectively worth over \$250 billion USD, promising to fix a healthcare system already afflicted with profit motives and privatization is painfully indicative of how effectively we have been convinced that the solutions to systemic injustices lie in investments by philanthropists and the Buffets of our world, who, despite having consistently demonstrated scabrous greed and indifference to the treatment of workers, are somehow supposed to be our saviours because they are in a charitable mood. Legitimizing such farcical attempts to distract the masses from the need for structural changes to the American healthcare system—involving a transition to a single-payer system, likely made possible by taxing billionaires like Buffet, Bezos, and Dimon at higher rates—delays and counteracts meaningful movements that do not make the mistake of embracing the charity of the wealthy. This tendency to outsource the responsibility to address injustice while solutions are known and within reach for the

public sector to deal with transcends the American healthcare system; to witness its ubiquity, one need look no further than injustices in one's own city.

Most approaches to activism share two significant defects—one is their reverence for and reliance on charity and philanthropy as solutions to systemic injustice, and the other is their mischaracterization of the role of governments in responding to unjust systems. This paper outlines how these errors manifest, specifically as they apply to advocacy on local issues in British Columbia, Canada. It also seeks to propose a refined vision of activism, one devoid of the above criticisms which many mainstream activists share. To develop an understanding of what exactly this would look like in practice, this paper analyzes the resistance to supportive housing in suburban neighbourhoods from this new perspective, which is established by abandoning charity and equality of opportunity as guiding principles.

Activists and unions have accomplished the most significant structural social reforms in human history, with dissident organizations protesting and pressuring governments to sign said reforms into law. Establishing humane working conditions and credit systems for farm workers in the United States would not have been possible without the United Farm Workers Movement led by Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta. Apartheid in South Africa would likely still be alive today, oppressing black South Africans, had it not been for the Anti Apartheid Movement. American segregation would have persisted had it not been for the radical forces within the Civil Rights Movement. These victories share a common thread—it was activists who popularized them, and governments, not charities, who felt obliged to answer the calling of the people. These victories also necessarily included abandoning the mischaracterization of government as the voice of all citizens over which it governs and an institution whose role it is to ensure equality of opportunity for all its constituents. Equality of opportunity—or more briefly put, “equality”—has, I argue, pernicious, long-lasting effects on vulnerable populations and must be replaced more widely by equality of outcome, or “equity.”

In addition to offering a more reasoned form of activism, this paper evaluates examples of charity- and justice-based activism in Vancouver, BC. I discuss my role as president of Kitchen on a Mission, a registered non-profit organization that facilitates the donation of food, hygiene products, books, and clothing from businesses to shelters and supportive housing projects around the city. The paper uses Kitchen on a Mission as an example to evaluate common modes of charity-based activism, and ultimately offers a pathway by which organizations can effectively transition to a justice-based system. To be clear, this paper does not argue that charity is exclusively a negative force. It would be disingenuous to do so. In critiquing the role of charity in activism, this paper cedes that charitable and philanthropic acts have historically contributed to the wellbeing of less fortunate communities, but argues that, in doing so, they have further entrenched the very problems they were supposed to address. Charity has never been a solution to systemic injustice—it has always been temporary relief, a placeholder that allows injustice to become entrenched and metastasize. Addressing injustices in our communities requires us to stop treating symptoms of a broken system and unfair legislation and instead restructure and fix the system, rewriting the legislation that leads to injustice.

CHARITY AND THE NORMALIZATION OF INJUSTICE

Charity retains a squeaky-clean reputation; rarely do we consider its efficacy and potential negative implications. Whereas justice seeks to structurally change broken systems, charity works within these systems, offering temporary relief to injustice. The distinction thus far is purely in terms of definition—that is, anyone who spends any amount of time thinking about the difference between charity and justice would likely arrive at this conclusion. However, the more difficult contention I seek to make is that charity not only falls short of justice as a mode of activism, but it also actively normalizes and deepens injustice and degrades any possibility for real solutions to problems facing vulnerable communities. In order to develop an understanding of the shortcomings of charity as a mode of activism, though, a working definition of the word *charity* itself is a requisite. The same goes for the concept of philanthropy, which is often used interchangeably with charity (Schnurbein et al., 2014, p. 3). In their book, *My Impact – Fundamentals of Modern Philanthropy*, Schnurbein et al. (2014) offer the following definition of philanthropy:

Someone who engages in philanthropy—that is, someone who donates his or her time, money, and reputation to charitable causes—is hence referred to as a “philanthropist.” The most conventional modern definition of philanthropy is “private initiatives, for public, common good, focusing on quality of life.” This combines the social and scientific aspect of philanthropy, developed in the 20th century, with its original humanistic tradition. (p. 3)

Schnurbein et al. accurately characterize charity as private initiatives, meaning initiatives that are separate from the public sector and government control. One way to begin to see the problems with privatized band-aid solutions to issues like urban poverty is to evaluate the most honed versions of charitable action.

Effective altruism, championed by philosopher Peter Singer, is a movement that promotes charity and philanthropy preceded by research into the most effective form of charity (Synowiec, 2016). Ethician Jakub Synowiec notes that the goal of effective altruism is utilitarian; its purpose differs from traditional and hedonistic charity in that it focuses exclusively on the effectiveness of achieving its objectives (Synowiec, 2016). The emphasis that effective altruism places on efficacy is noble; charity is too often viewed and used as a hedonistic outlet, as participants in charity frequently cite and fixate on how good giving makes them feel. However, as polished as this new approach to charity is, it distracts from the drawbacks of the system of charity itself. Daren Acemoglu outlines one such drawback in his critique of Singer, writing, “In the case of philanthropy, the problem isn’t street justice but replacing the government’s role in, say, providing health care” (Acemoglu, 2015). Acemoglu’s dissent uncovers the most gaping hole in the theory of effective altruism—that its practice makes space for the entrenchment of the social dynamics that perpetuate the need for charity. Without the very existence of charity—regardless of effectiveness—the onus of addressing injustice would fall entirely, and more intensely, on the public sector. If charities that distributed food to food-insecure individuals in cities like Vancouver ceased to exist, the pressure on governments to directly act on food insecurity would be far more intense. While charities can be effective in keeping communities going on a short-term basis, a reliance

on third-party action is not sustainable in the long term. It should not be the role of students and activists to close the seams in food systems to account for people who can't afford to eat. Their efforts should instead be funnelled into social movements, pushing for food systems entirely devoid of seams. The solution to food insecurity on a local scale is not charity; it is the abolition of charity. We can only have equitable food systems when public policy removes the need for charity entirely.

I do not propose that charity be sworn off entirely immediately, just that its influence be gradually phased out to make the need for systemic change more conspicuous, and that we begin to view the existence of charity as a failure on behalf of elected bodies. My view of how we abandon our reverence for charity posits an approach that embraces the notion that all who do not directly oppose injustice are complicit. Even one who does not directly perpetrate the injustice must still accept their complicity in its occurrence. This must also apply to elected officials. Immediately upon taking office, elected officials must accept blame for all the oppressive, unjust forces over which they govern. From the colonization and incessant oppression of Indigenous peoples to the existence of homelessness and poverty, responsibility must be concentrated on the silent and, even more strongly, on the elected. Blame for the existence of charities ought to also be placed on elected officials and all those who do not actively work to dismantle the influence of charity. This is no doubt a radical view and shift in thinking—but it effectively brings attention to the urgency of addressing struggles like homelessness that are so inimical that the only logical response is a radical one. Instead of viewing progress as an accomplishment, then, elected representatives ought to begin viewing their work as an obligation. To truly solve homelessness, rampant wealth inequality, and the climate crisis, we need to classify bold action on behalf of governments as an obligation.

On a personal level, though, connecting one's awareness of their complicity in the normalization and entrenchment of injustice to proactive steps towards dismantling charity is not straightforward. In transitioning from charity to justice as a personal mode of activism, one must reconcile the ramifications of ending one's charitable work with those of continuing. Yet progress away from charity must continually be made. Kitchen on a Mission's regular work—of organizing and transporting donations to people in need in Vancouver—is charity, but it is also necessary on a short-term basis. Thus, the issue of abandoning charity is more nuanced than a one-step cancellation of all charity; it must be gradual and steady. At Kitchen on a Mission, for every hour we spend on charitable work, we spend several hours on justice-based work: social media advocacy, rallies, educational workshops, and publishing our book, *Home: 78 Letters for 78 New Neighbours*, and *a Vision for Supportive Housing Advocacy*. A major part of our work involves connecting with other organizations to work collectively toward justice instead of charity. Most representative of this shift toward meaningful activism is our mantra: “we want to go out of commission, replaced by real solutions in our civic systems”; it shows that we—and hopefully an increasing number of people—are cognizant of the fact that real solutions to food insecurity will only be achieved by structural changes to the food system, not donations.

EQUALITY, EQUITY, AND THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT

To understand the next defect in common modes of activism, it is necessary to make the distinction between equality and equity. Winston-Salem State University (WSSU) discerns the following:

The terms equality and equity are often used interchangeably; however, they differ in important ways. Equality is typically defined as treating everyone the same and giving everyone access to the same opportunities. Meanwhile, equity refers to proportional representation (by race, class, gender, etc.) in those same opportunities. To achieve equity, policies and procedures may result in an unequal distribution of resources. For example, need-based financial aid reserves money specifically for low-income students. Although unequal, this is considered equitable because it is necessary to provide access to higher education for low-income students. (WSSU, 2016)

Another way of discussing the difference between the two terms is denoting them as *equality of outcome* and *equality of opportunity*. In the paper “Defending Equality of Outcome,” London School of Economics political scientist and professor Anne Phillips notes that equality of opportunity (equality) seeks to set an even playing field in public discourse for all, whereas equality of outcome (equity) recognizes differences in the public’s existing condition and distributes policy and resources unequally but proportionately to address existing inequalities (Phillips, 2004, pp. 1-8). The trouble with embracing equality is that, much like charity, it perpetuates and entrenches injustice. It is a clear and often intentional step back from meaningful action.

In an article for the *New York Times* entitled “In Talk of Economy, Obama Turns to ‘Opportunity’ Over ‘Inequality,’” journalist Jackie Calmes argues that in shifting away from meaningfully addressing inequality through equity and instead touting equality of opportunity, Barack Obama’s rhetoric is a tactic to steer the debate away from “talk of income inequality [that] smacks of class warfare and redistribution of wealth, of taxing the rich to give to the poor” — otherwise known as real solutions to wealth inequality (Calmes, 2014). Further evidence of this ploy by elected officials is ubiquitous on a local scale in Vancouver, and many are falling for it.

As a volunteer and organizer with the Vancouver Tenants Union, an organization that builds grassroots support for progressive policies that protect tenants in Vancouver, I organized in support of City Councillor Jean Swanson’s motion B.10: “Protecting Tenants from Renovictions and Aggressive Buy-Outs.” The motion proposed to end predatory renovictions, ensuring that landlords would not be able to evict tenants to perform renovations without the option for the tenant to return after the completion of the renovations. The full motion read:

Therefore be it resolved

A. That the City immediately amend its Tenant Relocation and Protection Policy to:

- i. Apply to all forms of rental accommodation, all areas of Vancouver and to all permits which will result in the temporary or permanent displacement of tenants; and

ii. Require landlords to offer displaced tenants the opportunity to temporarily move out for the necessary duration of the renovations without their leases ending or rent increasing.

B. That the City devise methods to keep track of all apartment buildings sold in Vancouver and immediately inform Vancouver tenants of their rights.

C. That the City explore measures to regulate and publicly register all tenant buyouts.

D. That the City immediately and forcefully call on the province to implement effective vacancy controls for British Columbia, or alternatively, to give Vancouver the power to regulate maximum rent increases during and between tenancies. (Swanson, 2018)

Renovictions are a form of systematic eviction that displace and alienate working and low-income people from their homes, and the motion was seen by many as a necessary measure to provide struggling renters in the city with relief. However, some of the arguments that were being used to dissuade other councillors from voting affirmatively were deeply troubling, and one of them was particularly misguided and pertinent to this paper: several city councillors argued that a moratorium on renovictions would benefit the lives of working people at the expense of wealthier landlords, which they saw as unacceptable, because City Council's job is to "not tip the balance too much." Much like Barack Obama, several of Vancouver's city councillors evaded substantive reform by deferring to equality. Identifying this technique of gaslighting the public and the negative effects of blindly embracing equality is the first part of building effective activism; the second part is developing a method to use this knowledge, which brings us to the need to fundamentally modify how we view the role of government. Instead of viewing government as an institution whose responsibility is to uphold and represent the interests all its constituents, it must be viewed as one responsible for defending the most vulnerable and disadvantaged. Elected representatives do not hold office to fight for all citizens equally—to the councilmember, MLA, MP, and Minister, disadvantaged communities are categorically more important, because real social change requires that people who have privilege take steps back, and it is the government's role to ensure that happens.

APPLYING JUSTICE, EQUITY, AND CLASS ANALYSIS TO SUPPORTIVE HOUSING

Finally, to demonstrate how replacing charity with justice and equality with equity would look practically, we explore the controversial topic of supportive housing in suburban, middle- to high-income, single-family neighbourhoods. In late 2017, the City of Vancouver announced plans to build 78 modular homes in the neighbourhood of Marpole, across the street from an elementary school—not that that is important. Many locals ardently opposed the project, claiming that a supportive housing project near an elementary school somehow posed a threat to children. The argument had two facets: the first was the claim that a supportive housing project would bring needles to the neighbourhood and would somehow threaten the children nearby, and the second was the claim that members of the relatively affluent neighbourhood should get to choose who lives in their neighbourhood. The first part of the argument is very conspicuously

logically flawed and is not deserving of an in-depth rebuttal, because comparing the hypothetical, unproven fear of needles to the right to housing for people who need it is simply ridiculous. It also implies that it is acceptable to have needles in other neighbourhoods, but they become a problem when—the universe forbid—they enter affluent single-family neighbourhoods. The second facet is more interesting and germane to the topic of this paper, but is equally illegitimate.

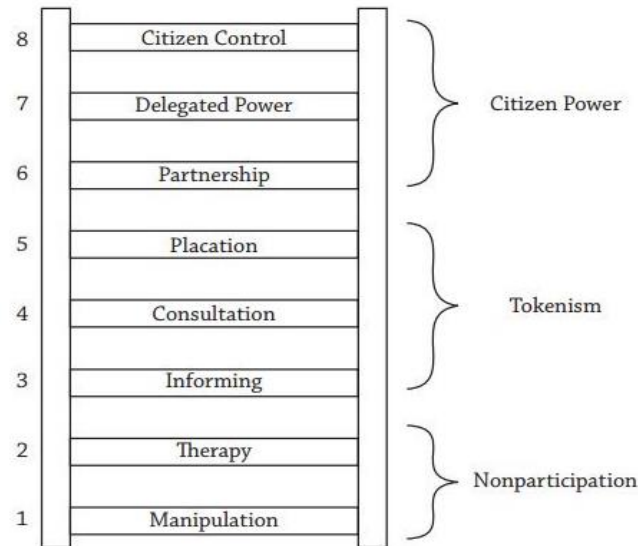


Figure 2: Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation (Arnstein, 1969)

Shown above is Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation, which is a commonly cited model that outlines different levels of citizen participation in public decisions (Arnstein, 1969). The principle is that all decisions can be classified into levels of citizen participation—nonparticipation, tokenism, and citizen power, in ascending order of favourability. Arnstein argues that, ideally, all decisions should be made through citizen control. This theory is not without value: its emphasis on democracy and public participation is important. But it is also incomplete, and is often used to do harm to communities desperate for urgent relief. Similar to charity and equality, one must critically assess the implications of public participation. It is not to be blindly employed. Segregationist resistance to the integration of people of colour into suburban neighbourhoods in Vancouver relied on this blind reverence of citizen participation. Resistance to supportive housing projects uses this same tactic—hateful attitudes covered by illegitimate claims to the right to participate in public decision-making. Thus, public participation and consultation must include an analysis of power and class; they must be applied differently to affluent neighbourhoods opposing supportive housing projects than to low-income neighbourhoods resisting gentrification. In an article published in late 2017, Darcie Bennett of Pivot Legal Society writes,

Municipalities across BC have authority to hold public consultations, and approve or dismiss applications to develop housing using their power over land use and zoning within their jurisdictions. This power, which is well equipped to consider traffic flow, sewers and view corridors, has resulted in a series of poorly

managed referendums on whether or not people living in poverty belong in a community. (Bennett, 2017)

Bennett rightly argues that public participation is being used, as it was once used to advocate for residential segregation, to deny hundreds of people the right to housing (Bennett, 2017). The principle of citizen control is being coopted by groups who discriminate based on social class; it has become in many ways a weapon with which to poor-bash and gate-keep neighbourhoods that have the potential to provide stable housing to homeless people.

This dangerous technique is being employed in neighbourhoods across British Columbia, most recently in Maple Ridge, where locals, with the support of their mayor and all but one city councillor, are protesting a provincially sanctioned modular housing project, using the slogan: “Our city, our voice.” One might listen to this rhetoric and be fooled by its immediate simplicity and seeming correctitude, but once equipped with the arguments of this paper, will, I hope, realize that words are to be analyzed and platitudes are to be challenged.

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