CHAPTER 1

Class Dismissed: The Issue Is Accountability

bell hooks

As a society we continue to be silent when it comes to issues of class. This silence helps perpetuate the myth of abundance—the assumption that one of the most outstanding features of a democratic society is that class does not matter since everyone can move up the class ladder.

More than ten years ago, in the preface to Where We Stand, I wrote:

Many citizens of this nation, myself included, have been and are afraid to think about class. Affluent liberals concerned with the plight of the poor and dispossessed are daily mocked and ridiculed. They are blamed for all the problems of the welfare state. Caring and sharing have come to be seen as traits of the idealistic weak. Our nation is fast becoming a class-segregated society where the plight of the poor is forgotten and the greed of the rich is morally tolerated and condoned.

Unfortunately, these words remain an accurate description of class dynamics today. While there was once a United States that allowed poor and working folks to gain class mobility, to change and shift class positionality, this is no longer possible. In these hard times of economic crisis shifting one’s class location is no simple matter. Currently, many more of our nation’s citizens find themselves descending rather than ascending the ladder of upward class mobility.

Indeed, one positive impact of the recent economic crisis is that it has compelled masses of citizens to acknowledge class and class differences, and more importantly to face that exploitive and oppressive class hierarchies uphold domi- nator culture. Becoming aware of class difference that perpetuates domination—a predatory oligarchy where those with the greatest class power control and exploit everyone—has changed the way all of us experience class.
Ironically, this awareness has not made it easier to have open discussions of class. In this imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy, it is easier for everyone to talk about race, gender, and even sexuality than to talk about class. Despite censorship and silencing, awareness is growing—a developing class consciousness is emerging. The movement for social justice “Occupy Wall Street” is a fine example of this new trend.

Despite the power of the Occupy movement, it is unfortunate that many radical young folks find it more compelling to critique and condemn the rich and the super-rich than to challenge each other and everyone else to examine our class values, our class allegiances. It is so much easier to condemn the rich and the super-rich than to engage in vigilant critical evaluation of all our relationship to capitalism. In his insightful book *How Much Is Enough*, Arthur Simon explains:

> Capitalism stimulates and thrives on our human desires to possess more, a desire that instinctively gravitates towards greed, which tends to create disparities that make some rich while leaving many impoverished. It is good at generating wealth, not so good at spreading it around... it is simply driven by the profit motive.

The free enterprise capitalist system with its insistence on unlimited growth nourishes greed. As stated in *Where We Stand*, “greed has become the common bond shared by many of the poor and the privileged.”

All of us who live within the capitalist system, who benefit from its largesse, are vulnerable; we all have within us the capacity to nurture a relentless and brutal greed that simply does not invite emphatic concern and compassion for those who are less fortunate, especially the poor. Journalist Hervé Kempf, in *How the Rich Are Destroying the Earth*, challenges all of us to acknowledge the connection between the greed of the rich and our own greed. With keen insight he highlights the reality that “material growth intensifies environmental degradation,” which wreaks its most devastating havoc on the poor and indigent. Explaining further, Kempf contends:

> The oligarchy also exercises a powerful indirect influence as a result of the culture attraction it consumption habits exercise on society as a whole... People aspire to lift themselves up the social ladder, which happens through imitation of the superior classes’ consumption habits. Thus, the oligarchy defuses its ideology of waste throughout the whole society.

Hence masses of people from all class locations are driven by shared greed. Again, while radical folk from all class may have sharp critiques of the rich and superrich, there is little discussion of the way in which greed articulates itself in all our daily lives.

Continued silence around the issue of class on the part of aware privileged class folks (including many progressives) stems from the individual and collective fear that the spotlight of interrogation will shine on us. And, the fear is that this light will show that in the final analysis our collective greed, our commitment to