



Why Somatics for Social Justice and a Transformative Movement?

We believe that personal, community and social transformation are interdependent. One inherently affects the next, and one can limit the other if not transformed. We also believe that a politicized somatic change theory and practice have a radical contribution to make to the effectiveness and transformative capacity of the progressive Left, at the levels of theory, change models, action and implementation.

Somatics is a path, a methodology, a change theory, by which we can embody transformation...individually and collectively. Embodied transformation is foundational change that shows in our actions, ways of being, relating, and perceiving. It is transformation that sustains over time. Somatics pragmatically supports our values and actions becoming aligned. It helps to develop depth and the capacity to feel ourselves, each other, and life around us. Somatics builds in us the ability to act from strategy and empathy, and teaches us to be able to assess conditions and “what is” clearly. Somatics is a practice-able theory of change that can move us toward individual, community and collective liberation. Somatics works through the body, engaging us in our thinking, emotions, commitments, vision and action.

Somatics looks at change, both creating and sustaining it, from an integral framework. Its principles and practices are grounded in the interdependence between mind, body, spirit and relationship, “collective shape” and the social and historical context in which we live. This interdependence is key to personal, community and social transformation. A somatic theory of change helps us understand how personal, collective and societal systems perpetuate themselves, can be opened and leveraged to transform, and can purposefully be moved toward radically new ways of being, new practices and structures. Somatics purposely elicits resilience and pragmatically builds a “new shape” through body centered transformation. It shows us how to navigate the particularly tricky terrain of “deconstruction” and opening that is a natural part of transformation. Somatic theory and practice helps us embody emotional competency, be generative in conflict, build lasting trust and design practice that is aligned with our commitments and visions for change.

Aligning Principles and Practices: Embodying Change

From the perspective of a politicized somatics, the vast majority of our practices and ways of being are embodied, automatic, and mostly unconscious. Most of these practices have been inherited through our communities and social conditions. Some of what is embodied works and some of what is embodied is counter to our organizational, movement and systemic change goals. The questions we face then become:

- Is what we are embodying working?
- Do our practices (individually and collectively) reflect our social justice principles and values, the vast majority of the time?

- Can we effectively build power given the opportunities and limitations of the conditions within which we live? Are we gathering and able to effectively use the power we need for systemic change?
- Can we see/feel and change how the conditions have impacted us? Where and where not? How much of our protective and/or non-useful behavior is needed because of ongoing conditions, and how much is a reaction that is no longer needed, but hasn't been healed or changed?
- Do we know how to transform individually and as groups to more deeply align with social justice and liberation? On purpose, and with consistent results?
- Do we use our individual and collective resilience purposefully?
- Do we know how to transform or be transformative as a movement?

Somatics can support the social justice movement in the United States in becoming foundationally rooted in transformative theory, analysis and practice. Personal and social transformation work must go together; our approaches are insufficient unless both are included. We embody our social conditions and the survival strategies through which we have navigated them...to create effective change, we need to change. Alongside this, if we do not change conditions, the same oppressive dynamics and survival mechanisms will continue to be embodied in the next generations.

Somatics can support people who are part of the progressive Left to be in an ongoing and transformative process of growth, self cultivation and spiritual reflection, while our organizations can leverage transformative approaches in staff and member development, leadership, community organizing, strategy and movement building efforts. A deepened awareness and capacity for transformation can take place across movement sectors, making alliance building and the intersections of what are now considered separate issues, strong and vital. Somatics can deepen our ability to embody grounded, political ideology and to assess current conditions from a clearer, less reactive position. This enables us to have a more comprehensive awareness of our organizations, our movement and ourselves, and gives us the skills to transform at each of these levels.

Somatics has much to contribute to building more transformative people, leaders, organizations, alliances, and to building a more effective and compelling movement. At the same time, social justice principles, analysis, and political change theory can contribute to the development of somatics through keeping it accountable to liberation. This will help leverage its transformative power toward the benefit of the many, diversify its expression and practices, and make it accessible to oppressed communities and folks committed to social justice.

Assessing the Left: Realities, Resilience, Redemption

When we look at the current shape of the progressive Left, there are naturally strengths and limitations. These are largely shaped by social conditions, present and historical, as well as individuals' experiences and responses to them. In its work to develop the application of somatics to social justice work, the Somatics and Social Justice Collaborative (2009-10) assessed the following with regard to the progressive Left in this country:

Activists and organizations are using the following **embodied resilience** strategies:

- The capacity for deep care and empathy for oppressed peoples and the planet
- The ability to hold large complex issues without easy answers

- The ability to live through, deepen, heal and act after the often devastating experiences of systemic oppression and personal trauma
- The ability to be with and assess these conditions
- The ability to imagine a better, more just future
- The capacity to yearn for a different world, economy, governing values, relationship to the planet and each other—to have a yearning for justice
- The willingness to take action, against the odds
- Powerful history of others who lived and fought for liberation

Activists and organizations are also falling back on a number of **survival strategies, default habits** and ways of thinking, being and acting that have been embodied through the dominant culture, including the following themes:

- Critique-based, cognitive analysis is prioritized as the only tool for the job. Often alongside a lack of developed political ideology
- Often people are ousted, shunned or afraid to be, if they try to employ different ways of seeing or being. In fact, worth can often be judged on one's ability to critique alone.
- There is a high level of distrust around the expression of emotions or things perceived of as “soft” or individualistic, like healing and often spirituality
- And simultaneously, there's a high need for emotional skills building and addressing the emotional impact of trauma and oppression, including the particular skills of politicized healing and collective healing. This combination makes for a difficult setting in which to begin to do more substantial transformative work
- There is often a high level of distrust of each other, breaking ourselves into small groups of “like minded” folks
- An overall lack of access to and/or seeking out of deep healing, personal and relational transformation, or keeping this compartmentalized away from social justice work

While there is a strong culture of political critique of current social conditions and of each other, in general there is not grounded political ideology and analysis of change underpinning this critique. This lack of ideological grounding (for example being clear about the differences in strategy, impact and approach between revolutionary, radical and liberal) leaves the progressive Left in a reactionary position and doesn't enable us to consistently assess and design long-term structural change.

Except for faith based organizations, the progressive Left has inherited a framework that is suspicious of spiritual practice and process, which often leaves us with a critique of spirituality as individualistic, based in cultural appropriation, and/or a tool to disengage the masses from social action. While this analysis must be taken seriously in how spiritual practice can be used, it is critical we don't limit ourselves around the possibilities offered through spiritual connection and practice. Spirituality is shown to be one of the strongest resilience factors we have. It is worth grappling with the grounded critiques, as well as purposefully engaging practices that share social justice values and connect us to the wider mystery or unknown.

In general we find a high tolerance for: conflict, blame, separation, distrust, competition and hurt in the progressive Left and a low tolerance for intimacy, emotional range, trust, transformative conflict and deep relation as the norm. There is little access to education regarding the holistic impact of trauma and oppression and how much we are acting out of that with each other, within our organizations, and even in our strategies. Our conditions

and strategies have also left us with a limited number of folks having deep political ideological development.

The progressive Left has a complex and troubled relationship to power and building power. Power can be viewed as inherently “bad” or damaging because so many of us in the movement and others we work with/for have been harmed by the misuse of power. Within systems of oppression, we see it around us everyday. On the other hand we need to build power to impact change. The complexity appears when it feels like “too much” power is being built (an automatic distrust about how it will be used). This could be within an organization, a leader, a sector, etc. The automatic distrust, whether grounded or not, gets in the way of building power, and making sure that power is accountable to multiple sources in its use. The automatic move is to either take the power down or isolate the power and make it “bad”.

Naturally, social conditions are the major challenge for the progressive Left and the introduction of transformative principle and practices. Systemic oppression and the violence and pain in our families, communities and the wider world continue to push us toward survival strategies of numbing, thinking and not feeling, splitting off from one another, dominating, blaming and avoiding being blamed, etc. These are all normal responses to traumatic conditions and ways we automatically move to survive, protect and get through. In many ways this is what has become enculturated, not only in the progressive Left, but in our social norms as a whole. This is our challenge and also our opportunity. While introducing transformative methodologies can stir the bucket, bring up discomfort and discord to start, it can also quickly build new skills and an orientation that brings relief, felt hope, and pragmatic differences; we can understand and practice differently right away. This is on our side.

Supporting Embodied Transformation

Somatics works with transforming our embodied shape and deepening awareness within individual and collective bodies. Somatics facilitates opening processes for the sake of transformation toward more alignment with social justice principles, effective action and embodying our visions and values. Somatics allows us to see embodied survival strategies and default practices (and their historical usefulness), and strengthen resilience and purposely practice what it is we want to become, individually and collectively. It gives us means to purposely practice building power, affecting change, deepening trust and aligning with principles. Somatics sees sustainable change from an integral framework in which increased awareness, opening, and new practices each play a part. We see that somatic theory, a somatic sensibility (assessments, orientation), and its practical methodology can contribute toward a more transformative, powerful and effective social justice movement, while we can also benefit personally and organizationally through change, growth and healing.

Somatics can contribute a grounded and practical understanding and method of transformation to the social justice movement. With this contribution the social justice movement will be able to deconstruct what doesn't work, navigate the opening that's left, and purposely design practices that move toward a “new shape.” Because this is a more chaotic and inherently unfamiliar landscape, knowing the terrain and process of embodied

change is essential. Without this knowledge, we too often critique this phase, run back to what is known, or get lost and off track with few people to talk with honestly. Somatics can contribute a framework and path through this depth of change, while also holding an analysis of how essential it is for what we are committed to within social justice.

Somatics allows us to consciously design relevant practices. New practices can support healing and compassion while retaining rigor and values, strengthen trust and relationship, develop relevant political strategies, help us become clearer in our ability to assess social conditions, and help us relax in the face of the unknown. Our strategies, projects, and campaigns can use the pragmatic facts of resilience to empower our work. An understanding of the somatic impact of both individual and systemic trauma, and the processes by which to heal from this, can become available and seen as relevant to progressive Left organizations. These competencies, this new shape and relevant practices can be introduced and practiced with staff and constituencies in organizing, in leadership development, and across organizations and sectors.

Healing Individual and Systemic Trauma

Somatics is a leading methodology in facilitating healing from trauma. As people working within social justice, we're interfacing with the direct impact of traumatic experiences and working within oppressive conditions. Because of that we see that it is essential for the movement to be competent in both an analysis of trauma and its impact, and a pragmatic understanding of healing and working with it.

While we work to change the external conditions that create the systemic trauma experienced by oppressed communities, competency in recognizing and addressing trauma is critical if we are to sustain ourselves, as we deal with the trauma in our own lives. This does not mean that social justice organizers need to become healers, but rather that an understanding of trauma and healing can inform programming, change strategies and potentially address staff and constituency needs. While we see that politicized healers need a place in the movement in order to provide support and deeper healing, we also see that social justice organizational staff and members could benefit from foundational distinctions, practices and processes regarding trauma, its short- and long-term impact, and holistic healing processes. Somatics offers this. And, through somatics trainings for politicized healers we are helping to build the folks and skill base that the movement needs for its own individual and collective healing and transformation.

Addressing Privilege and Oppression

Because somatics is grounded in social justice principles, holds a systemic analysis of power, oppression and privilege, it can help us see what those systems have us embody individually and collectively. Individually, and within our organizations, we can take a different look at our own internalized oppression and privilege, noting how it perpetuates itself even when we "mean to" do it differently. What somatics understands is that these dynamics will perpetuate because they are embodied in us. Somatics offers us pragmatic tools to open and change these behaviors, practices, organizational systems, etc. Because somatics also helps us to work with shame, over- and under-accountability, centered accountability and contradiction, there are many ways to work with shifting both internalized oppression and privilege within oneself, within organizational dynamics and practices. When

looking at systems of oppression, we can begin to see the ways that these systems perpetuate themselves through violence and cooptation by rewarding participation in the system with safety, access and connection, while punishing participation that challenges or attempts to create alternatives to the system. Seeing through the somatic lens can increase our embodied understanding of the multiple contradictions inherent in privilege and oppression, inform our strategy, clarify our visions, and give us transformative ways to strengthen our collective struggle.

Strengthening the Left

We see that an integration of transformative principles and somatic change theory, processing, and practices can make two major contributions to the work of the progressive Left. The first is that the overall culture of the movement could shift from blame, mental critique and low-emotional capacity to one of depth, pragmatic wisdom and a practiced understanding of personal and social change processes from an integral perspective. It would be well understood (and practiced) that change at the personal, family, organizational, community, institutional, and social norms levels needs to be addressed from a multi-faceted approach. Transformation is what we are looking for, not only campaign wins or making it through a crisis. An integrative methodology including mind, body, emotions, spirit, relationship, ideology development, visioning and alternative institution building would be seen as relevant and applied at each of these levels.

The second contribution is that the movement could become a more potent and attractive alternative presence or force. When groups and organizations are in holistic practices and apply an analysis and approach that is fundamentally transformative, it is compelling. We need to build these alternative standards and organizations. We need to practice ways of being and organizing that create more justice, well-being, deep relatedness and spiritual awake-ness to offer an alternative in the progressive Left. We need to practically and theoretically address the real and compelling needs of safety and belonging, more effectively than the Right, and within our current conditions. Through this, there is the possibility of developing alternative models, organizations and collective responses to injustice that are transformative and build more collective power toward structural change. Mostly we can only develop, see and create out of what we have embodied. What's embodied is mostly unconscious until we make it conscious. Somatics quickly makes what's embodied obvious and immediately begins to develop our imagination and practice outside of our "old shape." We need to transform, individually and as organizations, to imagine, build just alternatives and create strong strategies for community and societal transformation.