



# Increasing Powerlessness of the Working Class and New Orientation in the Capitalist System

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**ABSTRACT:** British political scientist Cain Shelley is a fellow at Goethe University's Forschungskolleg Humanwissenschaften Institute for Advanced Studies working on „A Class For Itself?: The Future of Class Politics.“ Nowadays, the concept of „class“ can be viewed very critically. Cain Shelley, who completed his doctorate at the London School of Economics with a thesis on the concept of class consciousness and political practices, however, would like to breathe new life into the term. In an interview with UniReport, he concedes that in contemporary political or academic discourse, discussions of class occur far less frequently than in the past. „I won't deny that societies have changed dramatically since the Industrial Revolution, but in my work I try to argue that it would still be a mistake to abandon the language of class. Despite many significant changes, we can still observe different groups of individuals who have very different means of power when it comes to the production of goods and services in their societies,“ Shelley emphasizes. Thinking of people who work as teachers, bus drivers, postal workers, hospital porters, bar staff, cleaners, construction workers, supermarket cashiers, warehouse workers, and so on, he says, it is important to realize that these people's productive activity generally takes place under highly routinized and standardized conditions, but that they do not have the power to withdraw from the production process. „These individuals also do not direct, control, or manage anyone else in the production process; they are directed and managed by others. In my view, people working in such roles constitute the 21<sup>st</sup> century working class in 'advanced capitalist' societies – as distinct from both the middle class and the capitalist class, which hold very different powers over the economic production process.“ To Shelley, the working class includes more than blue-collar workers, (so-called) „unskilled“ workers, highly impoverished workers, or workers of a particular gender or race.

## Against class reductionism

What then is Shelley's view on the current questions about the meaning of gender and race? To what extent are these linked to the concept of class? „Of course, analyses of the oppression of gender and race are necessary to gain a full picture of a society's justice or injustice. We should certainly avoid claiming, as some people have done, that the abolition of classes alone would create a perfectly just, oppression-free society. However, without falling into reductionism, it is perfectly possible to claim that class is an important and necessary component of our theories. The difficulty is keeping all these considerations in mind at the same time. Feminist and anti-racist theorists have rightly been very critical of orthodox Marxist and other socialist accounts of class because they lead to a kind of 'class reductionism' in which all other forms of oppression are considered secondary and less important than class. One of the ideas I want to explore further during my research residency here is what it means to say that gender and racial oppression 'intersect' with class domination (and vice versa), and what implications this view has for the prospects of class mobilization,“ Shelley says. That being said, he agrees that the concept of class is used differently in Britain and Germany, especially with respect to different social systems: There are in fact crucial differences, he says, between the way economic production is organized in a country like Germany, often referred to as a „coordinated market economy,“ and in his native Britain. Here, he says, people speak of a „liberal market economy.“ Shelley emphasizes: „The differences notwithstanding, in both countries we find different groups of individuals who hold very different degrees of power in the production of goods and services in their societies – at least that is what I would argue. This means the concept of economic class remains an important tool for understanding overall equity or inequity in both societies and isolating those actors who can most effectively contribute to processes of progressive social transformation.“

Does he see himself as a political activist? Some social scientists, Shelley says, try to completely separate their academic research from their personal political involvement, but that is something he has never been able to do. That is why he doesn't strictly separate his work in academia from his activism, he says. „The American political philosopher Nancy Fraser formulated this wonderful phrase that critical theorists have a 'partisan, though not uncritical, identification' with particular political causes and activist groups. These ties shape the questions critical theorists ask and the assumptions they consider non-negotiable, but the theorist in them still tries to avoid slipping into blind political loyalty or ignoring inconvenient empirical findings. This is the model of 'activist theorizing' that I am trying to observe.“ In general, Shelley

finds the tradition of critical theory emanating from the Frankfurt School very inspiring. As a result, he says, Goethe University, with its connections to figures like Adorno and Horkheimer, is a natural home for him.

The Forschungskolleg is the perfect place for Shelley to spend his first year as a postdoc. „Weekend excursions to the nearby Taunus Mountains or walks in Bad Homburg’s many parks have helped me a lot with my writing, and the many discussions with the other Fellows here have also been very inspiring. I also attend weekly German classes offered by the Goethe Welcome Centre on Frankfurt’s main campus – but unfortunately, my German is still pretty miserable, although I hope to make some progress by the time my stay here has come to an end.“

**KEYWORDS**-powerlessness;working-class;new-orientation; capitalist-system;class reduction

## 1.INTRODUCTION

Capitalism is often thought of as an economic system in which private actors own and control property in accord with their interests, and demand and supply freely set prices in markets in a way that can serve the best interests of society. The essential feature of capitalism is the motive to make a profit. As Adam Smith, the 18th century philosopher and father of modern economics, said: “It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest.” Both parties to a voluntary exchange transaction have their own interest in the outcome, but neither can obtain what he or she wants without addressing what the other wants. It is this rational self-interest that can lead to economic prosperity.

In a capitalist economy, capital assets—such as factories, mines, and railroads—can be privately owned and controlled, labor is purchased for money wages, capital gains accrue to private owners, and prices allocate capital and labor between competing uses

Although some form of capitalism is the basis for nearly all economies today, for much of the last century it was but one of two major approaches to economic organization. In the other, socialism, the state owns the means of production, and state-owned enterprises seek to maximize social good rather than profits.

Cooperation and competition are core issues in various fields, since they are claimed to affect the evolution of human societies and ecological organizations. A long-standing debate has existed on how social behaviors and preferences are shaped with culture. Considering the economic environment as part of culture, this study examines whether the ongoing modernization of competitive societies, called “capitalism,” affects the evolution of people’s social preferences and behaviors. To test this argument, we implemented field experiments of social value orientation and surveys with 1002 respondents for three different areas of Bangladesh: (i) rural, (ii) transitional and (iii) capitalistic societies. The main result reveals that with the evolution from rural to capitalistic societies, people are likely to be less prosocial and more likely to be competitive. In a transitional society, there is a considerable proportion of “unidentified” people, neither proself nor prosocial, implying the potential existence of unstable states during a transformation period from rural to capitalistic societies. We also find that people become more proself with increasing age, education and number of children. These results suggest that important environmental, climate change or sustainability problems, which require cooperation rather than competition, will pose more danger as societies become capitalistic.

Competition and cooperation have been important issues in various fields, such as anthropology, biology, economics and sociology, because they are considered determinants of the evolution of human societies and ecological organizations [1, 2]. In evolutionary dynamics, competition is advantageous in the short run, but for long-run survival, cooperation can also be an effective strategy [1, 3]. In economics, rational self-interest models under competition can efficiently allocate private goods but cannot fully solve some public and intertemporal problems, such as natural resource allocation, public goods provision and resource sustainability for future generations [4, 5].

Social behaviors and preferences cannot be fully explained by genetic properties [3, 6–11]. Alternatively, culture-gene coevolutionary theory argues that human beings learn ideas and culture through a social learning mechanism, and this cultural transmission shapes human behaviors and preferences along with genetical properties [1, 3, 7, 11–17]. With culture-gene coevolutionary theory, the economic environment can be considered part of culture and is expected to affect people’s social preferences and behaviors. Given the economic growth of societies, together with concerns about environmental problems and future sustainability, this article addresses the relation between economic development and social preferences (or social behaviors) that are central to competition and cooperation in societies.

Several studies have documented how culture affects human behavior of competitiveness, fairness, equity and trust. Henrich et al. [7, 18] show that in indigenous societies, people exhibit higher prosociality and fairness when they are integrated into a market. Our research differs from that of Henrich et al. [7, 18] in that we study people and their social value orientations in three large-scale societies that are integrated into markets and have different degrees of capitalism, holding features such as language and religion constant. Leibbrandt et al. [2] show that fishermen in individualistic lake-based fisheries are more competitive than those in collective sea-based fisheries, suggesting that interactions with other people in the workplace affect human behaviors and preferences. Using a decomposed game of social value orientation (hereafter, SVO), Van Lange et al. [19] show that economics students are more competitive than psychology students and that “prosocial” individuals volunteer more in practice. Ockenfels and Weimann [20] and Brosig-Koch et al. [21] study people’s cooperative and solidarity behaviors in Eastern and Western Germany based on their different economic and social histories. They find that subjects from Eastern Germany act more selfishly than those from Western Germany in both public goods and solidarity games. By implementing a value-based study in 20 capitalistic countries, Schwartz [22] shows that people express stronger preferences for values such as self-assertiveness, mastery of natural and human resources, conformity, power and achievement in more market-driven and competitive societies.

None of the past studies focuses on the degree of capitalism in societies to analyze human behaviors and preferences for competition and cooperation despite the growth of capitalism that has taken place around the world. In this paper, we define “ongoing modernization of competitive societies” as capitalism and call highly modernized and competitive societies capitalistic. Most previous studies have been conducted in laboratories with student pools and in developed countries. Nevertheless, to generalize and understand real human behaviors, preferences and their implications, further studies are necessary in developing countries, as argued in Henrich et al. [23]. This study examines how the degree of capitalism in economic environments brings about an evolution in human behavior and social preferences by conducting field experiments in Bangladesh. There have been many arguments related to capitalism, such as Tonnies’ *Gemeinschaft/Gessellschaft* and Durkheim’s mechanical/organic solidarities, since the 19th century. We admit that what we call capitalism, “ongoing modernization of competitive societies,” overlaps with these ideas.

## II.DISCUSSION

History is filled with examples of individuals with little power being subjugated and objectified, causing many people to associate low power with vulnerability,” says Min-Hsuan Tu, PhD, assistant professor of organization and human resources in the UB School of Management. “Here, we demonstrate that when employees think they lack power in their workplace, they can feel threatened and become paranoid.”

This feeling is common, Tu says. For example, consider an entry-level staffer who closely guards her work, afraid she won’t be able to stand up for herself if another employee takes credit for it. If you’ve ever stressed over why a co-worker sent you a terse email or didn’t respond at all—“Does she dislike me?” “Is he trying to push me off this project?”—you’ve experienced it too.

To test the phenomenon, Tu and her co-authors ran five studies with more than 2,300 people. Some experiments asked participants to think about past work situations and then assessed their sense of power, paranoia and behavior. Another study, conducted over two weeks, looked at employees in an actual organization and measured how their feelings of power each day affected their level of paranoia and their work and home lives.

Their results showed paranoia increased as people felt less power at work.

In addition, paranoid individuals were more likely to engage in mild forms of aggression, like being unpleasant or critical toward a co-worker, complaining about work tasks and purposely wasting company resources. Some even took their aggression home, getting angry with a family member or spouse.

“Paranoia can cause people to interpret benign interactions—a colleague not saying hello in the hallway—as hostile or offensive,” Tu says. “Even without any interaction at all, some people may worry others are talking behind their back or conspiring against them.”

The researchers discovered, however, two factors that counteracted feelings of low power: socioeconomic status and workplace culture. Individuals with higher socioeconomic status, and those who felt supported by their company and manager, were less likely to experience paranoia than others with similar levels of power.

“Feeling powerless and vulnerable is common and often motivated by subtle experiences,” Tu says. “That’s why it’s especially important for leaders to create a supportive work environment, by allocating resources and offering promotions fairly, strengthening supervisor-subordinate relationships, disincentivizing self-serving behaviors, and removing job stressors.”

Capitalist economy or a market economy is a system under which privatization of production and the usage of the profits is highly prevalent. The production of goods is purely based on the demand and supply of the economy.

The exact opposite concept is socialism where a significant part of properties and means of productions are owned by the government or party-owned by private parties. Most countries in the modern world follow a mixed economy where both socialistic and a capitalist economy system is followed in different proportions.

Means of production such as machinery, raw materials, factories, and tools are owned by one or multiple owners who are referred to as capitalists. These capitalists hire workers in return for wages or salaries and give no share in the profit or overall growth of the business.

An interesting concept within this concept is alienation of workers from their own work. For instance, if a worker takes home a bag that they produced by themselves, it would be considered theft.

#### Features

Different capitalist economy countries have differences in the features of their systems. However, there are a few common traits amidst their ways of operation. Let us understand them through the discussion below.

#### #1 – Private Ownership

There is no restriction on private individuals to own properties, enterprises, machinery, and others in a capitalist economy. An individual is free to own/purchase, use and sell any number of properties or equipment based on their capabilities.

#### #2 – Price Determination

The forces of demand and supply determine the prices in a capitalist economy. The economy is consumer-oriented, and therefore, the price fluctuates based on the demand for a product and the available supply. The Government has no role in determining prices in such an economy.

#### #3 – Profit Orientation

The capitalist economy is profit-oriented. The main motive of every producer/manufacturer is to maximize profit, and all decisions relating to production and selling are determined accordingly.

#### #4 – Minimal Government Intervention

Government intervention in a capitalist economy is minimal. All major production, price, and selling strategies are determined based on the market forces. However, a certain level of Government intervention is present in all economies. This is because no country can function independently of the Government.

#### #5 – Competition

Independent buyers or sellers cannot influence market forces in a capitalist economy. Therefore there exists healthy competition between the buyers. The focus is on product differentiation and brand loyalty to have an edge.

### III.RESULTS

“Nobody hears the poor. It is the rich who are being heard.”—a discussion group of poor men and women, Egypt

“Poverty is humiliation, the sense of being dependent and of being forced to accept rudeness, insults, and indifference when we seek help.”—a poor woman, Latvia

“When the poor and rich compete for services, the rich will always get priority.”—a discussion group of poor men and women, Kenya

THE WORLD LOOKS different when viewed through the eyes of a poor person. In preparation for the World Development Report 2000/2001: Attacking Poverty, the World Bank conducted a research study that brought together the experiences of over 60,000 poor women and men from 60 countries around the world. Using open-ended qualitative and participatory research techniques, the Voices of the Poor study aimed to understand poverty from the perspective of poor people and to illuminate the human experience behind the poverty statistics.

The study establishes, first, that poverty is multidimensional and has important non-economic dimensions; second, that poverty is always specific to a location and a social group, and awareness of these specifics is essential to the design of policies and programs intended to attack poverty; and third, that despite differences in the way poverty is experienced by different groups and in different places, there are striking commonalities in the experience of poverty in very different countries, from Russia to Brazil, Nigeria to Indonesia. Poor people’s lives are characterized by powerlessness and voicelessness, which limit their choices and define the quality of their interactions with employers, markets, the state, and even nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Institutions both formal and informal mediate and limit poor people’s access to opportunities.

These findings challenge all those committed to working for poverty reduction. The realities of poor people’s lives must inform policymaking at macro as well as micro levels.

#### Multidimensional nature of poverty

When poor people speak about well-being, they speak about the material, social, physical, psychological, and spiritual dimensions, in addition to security and the freedom of choice and action. In Ethiopia, an older woman said, “a better life for me is to be healthy and peaceful and to live in love without hunger.” In Russia, “well-being is life free from daily worries about lack of money.” A Brazilian said well-being is achieved “when there is cohesion, no quarrels, no hard feelings, happiness, peace with life.” In Thailand, well-being was simply defined as “happiness: it is found in peace and harmony in the mind and in the community.”

Conversely, poverty and ill-being are the lack of material well-being, insecurity, social isolation, psychological distress, and lack of freedom of choice and action. Not having enough to eat or possessing any assets to cope with shocks were mentioned over and over again. A poor woman in Egypt said, “a poor person is a person who does not own anything that provides him with a permanent source of living. If he has a permanent source of income, he will not ask for other people’s assistance.” With few exceptions, poor people reported that insecurity and unpredictability of life have increased in the past few years. In Russia, a poor man said, “every day I am afraid of the next.” A poor woman in a favela (slum) in Brazil said, “there is no control over anything, at any hour a gun could go off, especially at night.” Poor people also stated that, unlike the rich, they did not have the luxury of long-term planning horizons. As a poor woman in Bulgaria put it, “to be poor means to live from day to day, you have no money, no hope.” The new poor in the former Soviet Union countries, who had no previous experience with poverty, often expressed shame, anger, and hopelessness in discussing their present conditions.

#### Poverty is specific to place and social group

Even within communities, poor people’s priorities and experiences can be different, depending on their gender, age, marital status, and ethnicity. The plight of widows emerged as distinct from that of other social groups, particularly in Africa and Asia. Irrespective of the number of years of marriage, widows often found themselves thrown out of households and destitute overnight. The experience of one middle-aged woman speaks for widows in other parts of Africa and Asia: “when my husband died, my in-laws told me to get out. So I came to town and slept on the pavement.” In Latin America, indigenous groups and those of African descent spoke about discrimination, whether in trying to get loans or buying food in the local markets or in their interactions with their children’s schools.

#### Powerlessness and voicelessness

The defining experiences of poor people involve highly limited choices and an inability to make themselves heard or to influence or control what happens to them. Powerlessness results from multiple, interlocking disadvantages, which, in combination, make it extremely difficult for poor people to escape poverty (see figure on page 20). By and large, poor



people say that insecurity of life has increased and they have not been able to take advantage of new opportunities because of corruption and a lack of connections, assets, finance, information, and skills.

Many poor people define poverty as the inability to exercise control over their lives. Old men in Nigeria say, “if you want to do something and have no power to do it, it is taluchi/poverty.” Limited resources force poor people to think in terms of very short time horizons. “You can’t think of the future because you can only see how to survive in the present,” says a group of young adults in Ecuador. Poor people are often forced to make agonizing choices: feed the family or send children to school; buy medicine for a sick family member or feed the rest of the family; take a dangerous job or starve. In Brazil, drawing the connection between power, control, and well-being, a poor woman says, “the rich man is the one who says I am going to do it, and does it.” The poor, in contrast, cannot fulfill their wishes or develop their capacities.

Low self-confidence both results from poverty and increases powerlessness and isolation from opportunity. A group of young men in Bower Bank, Jamaica, rank low self-confidence as the second biggest impact of poverty. “Poverty makes us not believe in ourselves; we hardly leave the community. Not only are we not educated but we don’t have a street-wise education.”

#### Quality of interactions with institutions

Poor people’s powerlessness and voicelessness are most clearly evident in the quality of their interactions with the formal and informal institutions on which they depend for their survival. Institutions mediate their access to resources and opportunities. But the individuals with whom they must interact in the private sector, state, and, to a much lesser extent, civil society are often exclusionary, rude, and uncaring, as well as corrupt and exploitative. Poor people end up depending on their own informal networks of kin and friends for survival and solace.

Most poor people, particularly women, survive in the informal sector through a patchwork of low-paying, temporary, seasonal, and, often, backbreaking jobs with little security and no guarantee of payment. Whether in Russia or Bolivia or India, poor people say that they often do not get paid when they complete a job and have no recourse to justice. In Russia, a man cries that he has been paid in mayonnaise and vodka when what he needs is cash to buy medicines for his sick daughter. In Malawi, poor fishermen tell of their powerlessness to negotiate a reasonable wage with boat owners: “The problem is that these boat owners know that we are starving, and so we would accept any little wages they would offer to us because they know we are very desperate ... we want to save our children from dying.” In Bulgaria, women over 25 report finding it difficult to find employment, while younger women report that sexual favors are expected from them in exchange for jobs. In Cambodia, a poor woman said, “poverty means working for more than 18 hours a day, but still not earning enough to feed myself, my husband, and our two children.”

### IV.CONCLUSIONS

Although some government programs are excellent and some officials are highly praised, these are the exceptions. In general, poor people report finding it difficult to take advantage of government programs, whether for loans, education, or health care, or for child, disability, or old-age benefits. They give detailed descriptions of the amounts and frequency of the unofficial payments they are required to make for government services. They speak of teachers who do not teach, doctors who do not show up or who want to see patients for a fee in their private clinics, nurses who extract payments even to register patients. They complain of loan officers who deduct 20–50 percent of loans as “processing fees,” policemen who are oppressors rather than protectors, and justice that is available only to the rich. All are commonplace occurrences in poor people’s lives. Poor people long for government officials who listen, can be trusted, do not lie, and are respectful even when they cannot help.

Nongovernmental and religious organizations are valued where they exist. However, they, too, are often seen as not accountable or as refusing to listen to the poor. Religious organizations are also faulted for excluding people of other denominations from their beneficence, thereby sowing seeds of disunity in communities.

In many countries, although more poor women are working outside the home to boost household incomes with their earnings, they are not necessarily experiencing greater autonomy, empowerment, or involvement in decisionmaking in households or communities. Where changes have occurred, for example in communities in Bangladesh and Brazil, civil society groups have played important roles, providing resources, skills training, and counseling to women and women’s solidarity groups. Nonetheless, the asymmetry of power within the household remains deeply entrenched, as indicated by widespread violence against women. Physical violence against women was reported in 93 percent of the communities visited. Domestic violence was reported in every community in Eastern Europe and Central Asia where the issue was

discussed. In the words of a poor woman in Bulgaria, “women must take care of everything and to top it all off, get beaten up every night if he comes home drunk.”

#### The challenge ahead

“A person doesn’t have the strength or power to change anything, but if the overall system changed, things would be better”—a poor man in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Poor people are not the problem. Nor is the culture of poverty. Poor people work hard, are remarkably resourceful, and show grit and determination in providing for their families. All those committed to poverty reduction must ask themselves three questions: How can we build on what already works, design institutions, and change institutional character so that they support poor people’s own initiatives to lift themselves out of poverty? How can poor people’s connectivity with institutions be increased so that they are heard and represented in programs and policymaking at the local, national, and global levels? How can the knowledge, resources, and power at the local, national, and global levels be used to support poor people’s own efforts?

Changing mindsets. The mindset of professional and technical experts must change. Instead of assuming they know what’s best, they must strive to understand poor people’s realities. They must be willing to listen; to understand poor people’s knowledge, priorities, and actions; and then to use their technical knowledge to respond to poor people’s concerns, whether at the local, national, or global levels. They must routinely ask what is happening within households and communities, so that macro and micro policy interventions designed to support women, men, or children have the desired impact. Participation in policy decisionmaking must be broad based.

Investing in poor people’s assets. Poor people need assets to reduce their vulnerability. Just as the definitions of poverty are multidimensional, so are the assets poor people need to move out of poverty. Five kinds of assets are particularly important in an overall context of powerlessness.

First is the body, often a poor person’s only asset. Frequently, it is weak, hungry, exhausted, and poor in appearance. For it to remain an asset rather than a liability requires measures to protect the health of the poor: provision of health care, water, sanitation, and energy-saving services that poor people can access and afford and are willing to use.

A second asset is organizational ability. Those who can organize and mobilize get their voices heard and their interests represented. The rich are organized and connected, the poor invariably are not. They depend primarily on their own informal and fragmented networks. Strong networks and membership-based organizations extending beyond the family and immediate community are essential to help poor people gain access to other assets and resources.

A third asset is information. While it is commonly recognized that information is power, poor people are cut off from information about their rights as workers, pensioners, and citizens, as well as about jobs, resources, and assistance programs. The experience of social entrepreneurs shows that new information technologies—the internet and cellular telephones—can be used to connect poor people to each other and to markets and governments, increasing their bargaining power. The experience of Bangladesh’s Grameen Bank, which makes loans to rural, landless, often illiterate, poor women for the purchase of cellular telephones, shows that poor people in these villages, armed with information about market prices, are able to negotiate better prices for their goods with middlemen. Owning telephones is also transforming the social status of the “Grameen phone ladies.”

A fourth asset is education. Faced with harsh realities, many poor parents cannot afford to send their children to school or keep them in school. Almost everywhere, poor people want to educate their children but calculate that the returns to their investment are unrewarding. Strategies must be found that change the cost-benefit outcomes for poor people of investing in their children’s education. These include providing scholarship programs for girls and boys and, when needed, compensating parents for the lost labor of their children.

Ideas and entrepreneurship constitute the fifth asset. At the national and global levels, there are laws that seek to protect intellectual property rights. In a rapidly globalizing world, poor people’s knowledge, whether of plants or traditional healing or building practices, needs protection so that they too can be the beneficiaries of their ideas and practices. Their property rights need to be registered.



There are banks, trusts, and venture capital to support rich people's ideas and entrepreneurship but not poor people's ideas and entrepreneurship. Financial services, venture capital funds, and micro insurance programs are needed to capitalize the ideas and initiatives of poor people, who work primarily in the informal sector.

Changing governance. Poor people know that their very survival depends on the resources controlled by others. With few options, they remain silent witnesses to exploitation and wrongdoing even when invited to speak out. As a poor man in Uzbekistan put it, "a dog won't betray its master." Examples of corruption and poor governance pervade poor people's lives. Change requires investment in reforms to make governments effective, participatory, transparent, and accountable to citizens. Strong networks of poor people's organizations and a strong civil society are required for effective governance at the local, national, and global levels. Let a poor man from Argentina have the final word: "If we aren't organized and don't unite, we can't ask for anything"

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