

White Women in the “Buffer Zone”: Exploring Racial Privilege



White Women in the “Buffer Zone”

Exploring Racial Privilege

GROUP

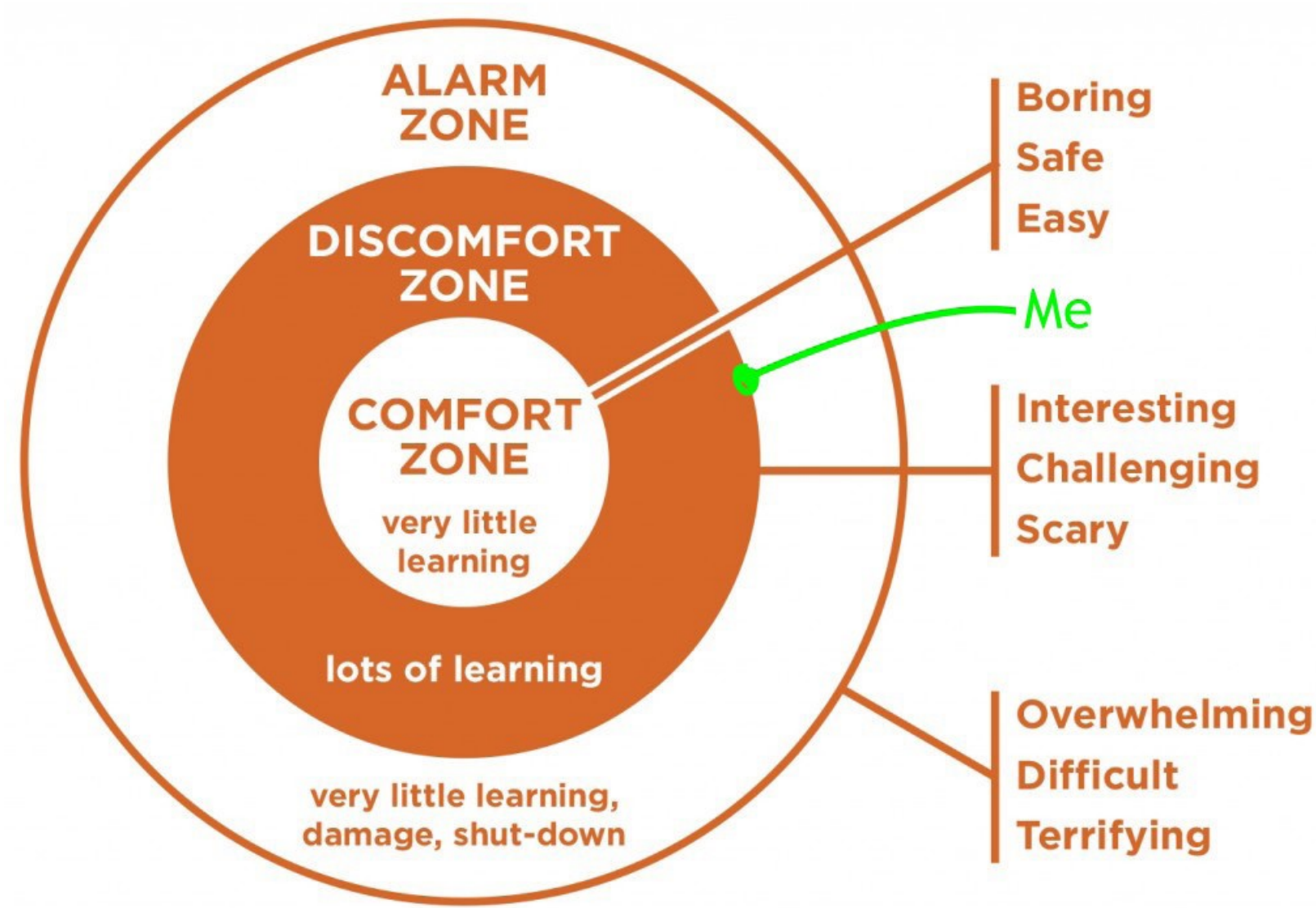
AGREEMENTS

- Speak from your own experience.
- Don't assume about others' lived experiences or identities. Seek understanding of each others' experiences and ideas (and acknowledge that full understanding might be impossible).
- We learn best when we are uncomfortable.
- Privilege conditions us to expect comfort and to conflate comfort and safety (i.e. white fragility).
- We don't learn when we are comfortable or when we are unsafe.
- We have to push ourselves into discomfort if we want to learn/unlearn.
- Strive for “Both/And”, let go of right and wrong, binary thinking.
- One person talks at a time.
- Expect and accept a lack of closure.
- Plan to leave with more questions than answers.
- Move from certainty to curiosity.
- Understand the difference between intent and impact.
- Strive for balance between theory and lived experience.
- Make space for the personal, interpersonal, institutional, and systemic – simultaneously and intersectionally.
- Allow yourself to be both self-critical and self-loving
- Be humble and horizontal – everyone in the room has something to learn and something to share. We are student-teachers and teacher-students.
- Stories Stay, Learning Leaves.
- Practice speaking and practice listening. Work especially on the one that is harder for you.
- Take care of yourself so you can stay present.
- Cultivate praxis; reflect – take action – reflect and act again.

Any edits/additions?

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“WHITE WOMAN”

A dominant or mainstream gendered, raced, and classed identity with certain images, messages and narratives that have been used to uphold systems of oppression. It is an identity that those socialized as white and female (even if the person does not use these terms) often have to negotiate with, whether by resisting, conforming, imitating, subverting or distancing.

It's this negotiation with the “white woman identity” that we are investigating, whether it is our current identity, a past or new identity, or a personal connection to people with this identity.



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“We grow up little girls- absorbing a hundred stereotypes about ourselves and our role in life, our secondary position, our destiny to be a helpmate to a man or men. But we also grow up white- absorbing the stereotypes of race, the picture of ourselves as somehow privileged because of the color of our skin. The two mythologies become intertwined, and there is no way to free ourselves from one without dealing with the other. “

-Anne Braden

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What is my relationship to the white woman
schema?

How do I conform, resist, imitate, subvert “white woman” identity?

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WHITENESS

A social construct that has changed over time, and has been used to explain problems with people who have refused to assimilate to the dominant colonizing culture in Europe and the US even after centuries of exposure. As a racial term, it now refers to people of primarily European background. British colonists referred to themselves as “people,” “citizens,” or “Christians,” and others were referred to by their racial categories. In the US, the term did not always include Jews, the Irish, Eastern Europeans, and Italians. These groups were included within the concept of whiteness as a response to chattel slavery in order to prevent interracial uprisings. The social status of “whiteness” and its benefits are also conferred upon some non-white skinned people who obey the systems of power and adhere to certain values.

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RACISM (RACE PREJUDICE + POWER)

Often manifests as actions, practices, or beliefs that consider individuals to be divided into races, based on color of skin, that can be ranked as inherently superior or inferior to others, or that members of different races should be treated differently.

Supported by the Supreme Court case *United States v. Brignoni-Ponce*, it is legal for police to take a person’s Mexican appearance into account when developing reasonable suspicion that a vehicle may contain undocumented immigrants.

-The New Jim Crow

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WHITE SUPREMACY (STRUCTURAL/SYSTEMIC RACISM)

An historically based, institutionally perpetuated system of exploitation and oppression of continents, nations, and peoples of color by White peoples and nations of the European continent for the purpose of establishing, maintaining and defending a system of wealth, power and privilege. It encompasses the entire system of White domination, diffused and infused in all aspects of society including its history, culture, politics, economics and entire social fabric, producing cumulative and chronic adverse outcomes for people of color.

Communities of color in the United States are more likely to be exposed to higher levels of environmental toxins, be employed in more dangerous jobs, live in poorer housing conditions, be exposed to higher rates of violence, face more lethal consequences for reacting to violence, stress and racism, and have lower rates of health care coverage and less access to high quality health care.

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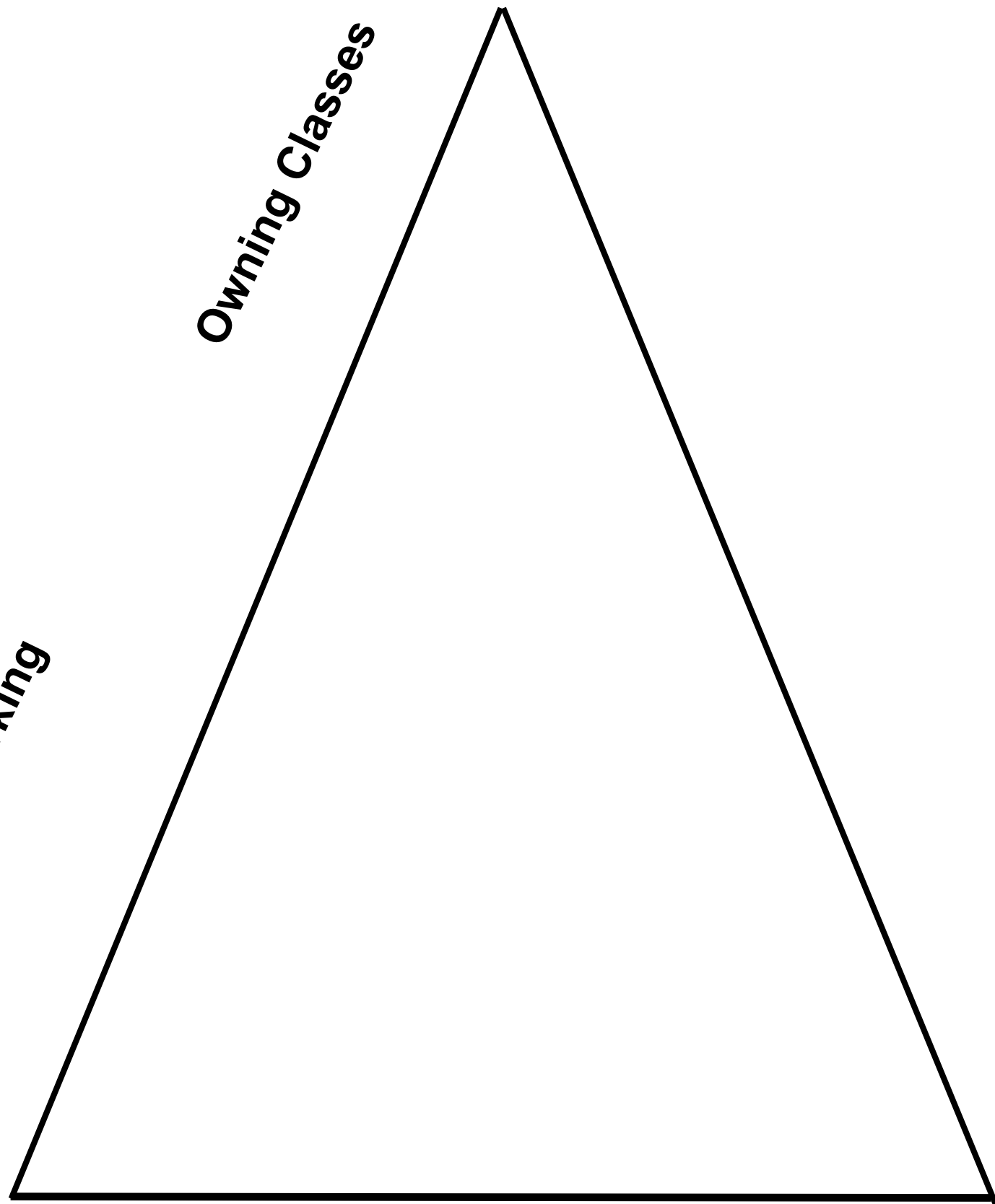
BUFFER ZONE

A range of jobs and occupations that structurally serve to maintain the wealth and power of the ruling class by acting as a buffer between those at the top of the pyramid and those at the bottom. The buffer zone serves a threefold function: taking care of people, keeping hope alive, and controlling people.

Paul Kivel's The Buffer Zone

*Low-income/working
Classes*

Owning Classes

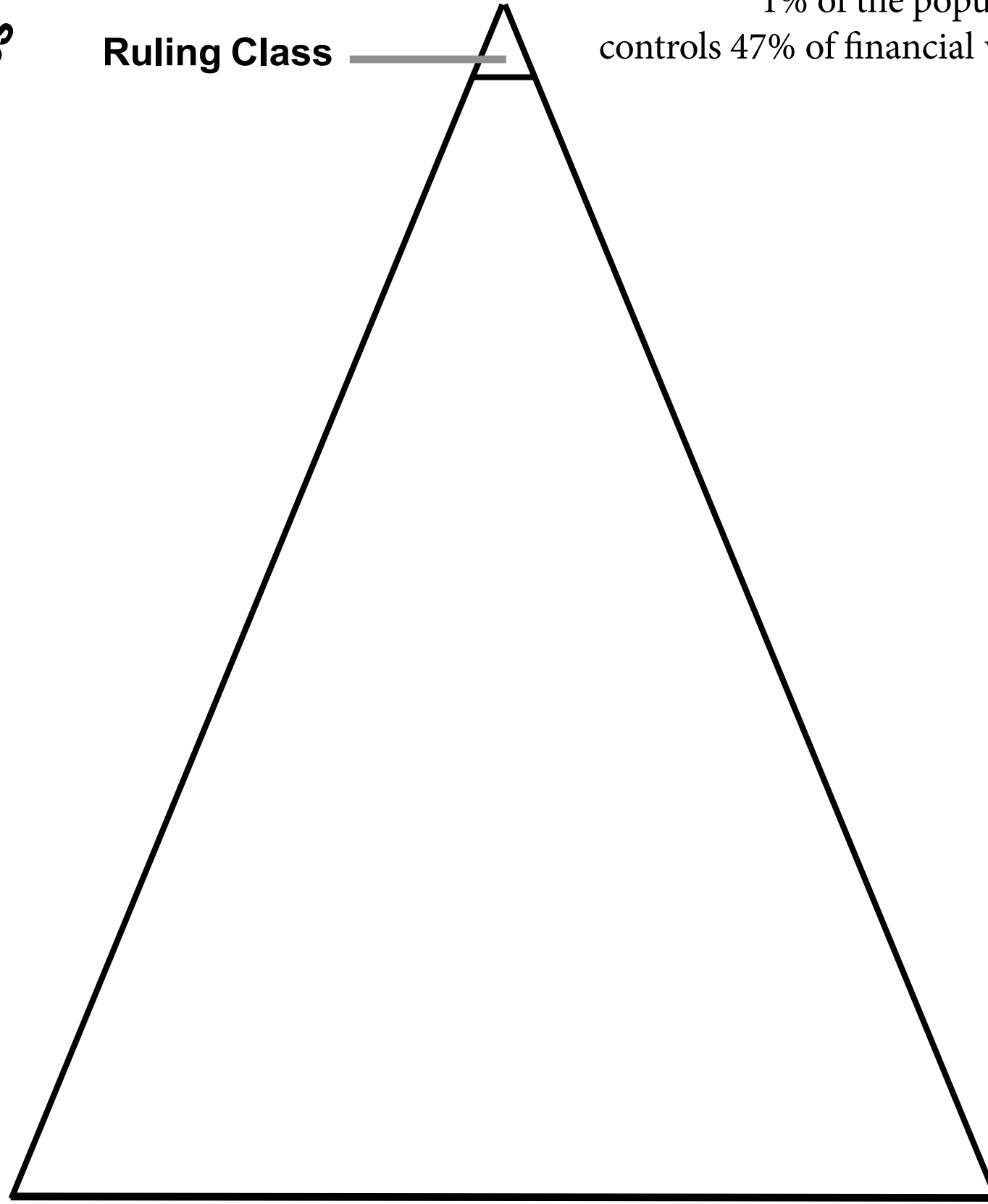


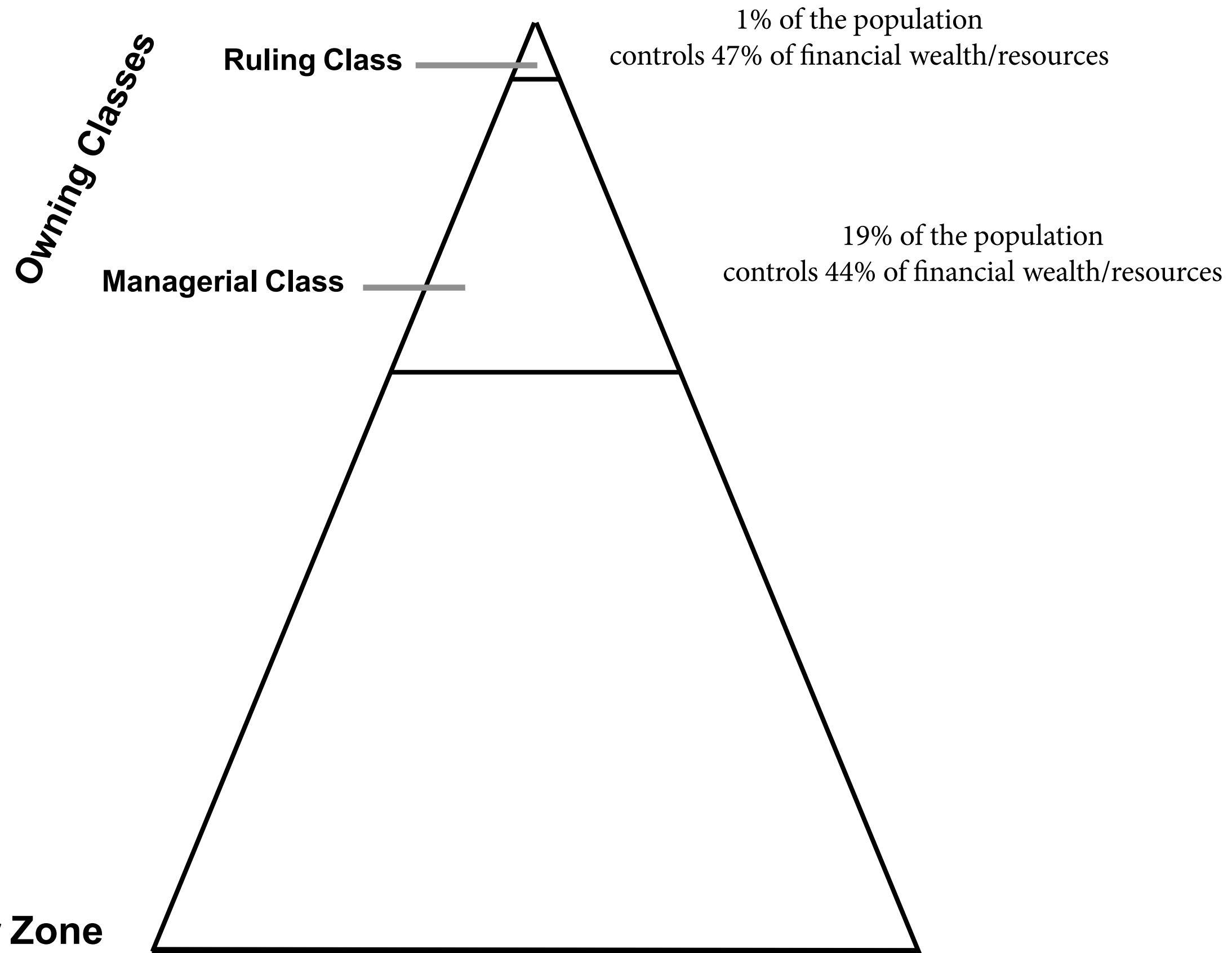
Owning Classes

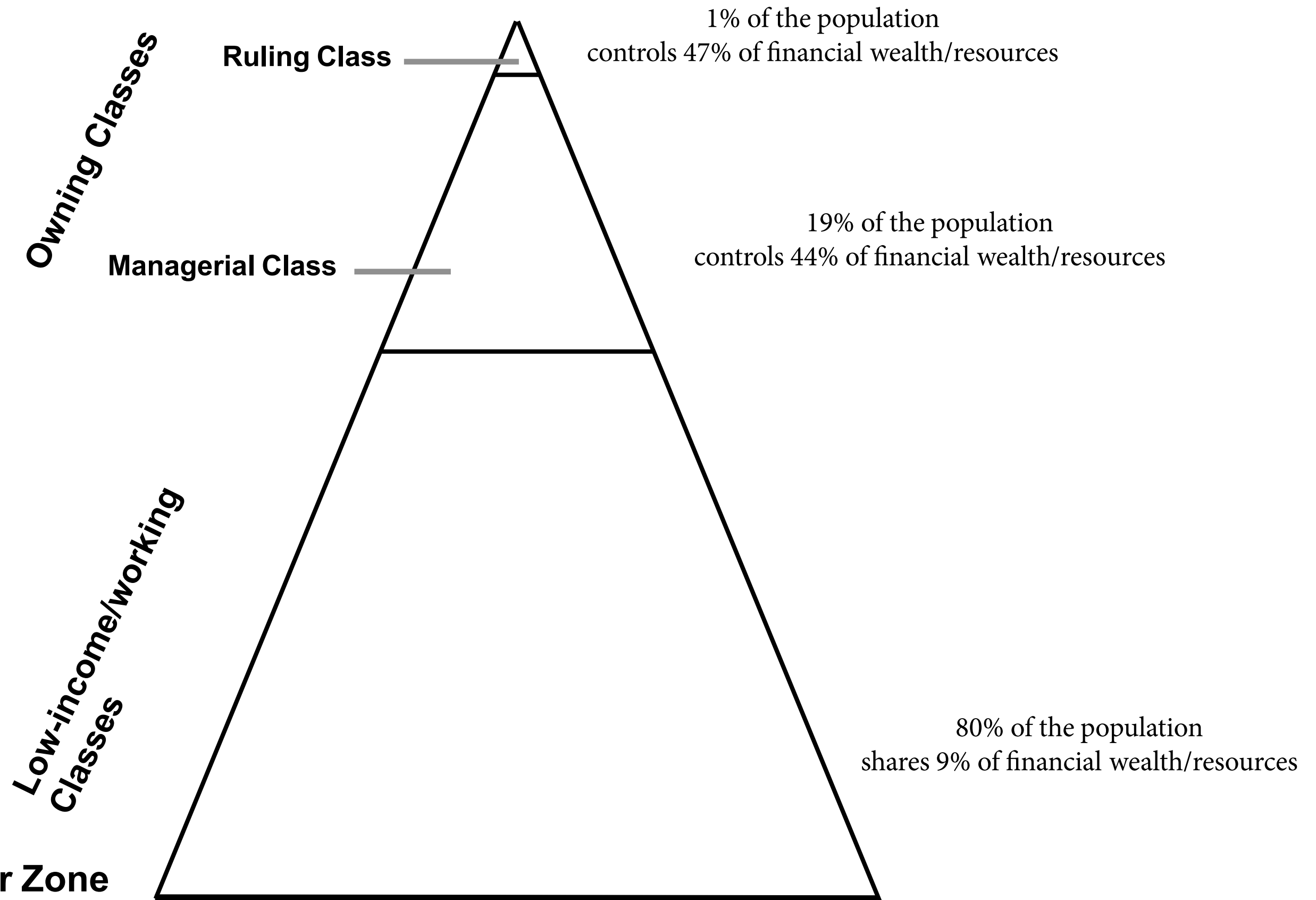
Ruling Class

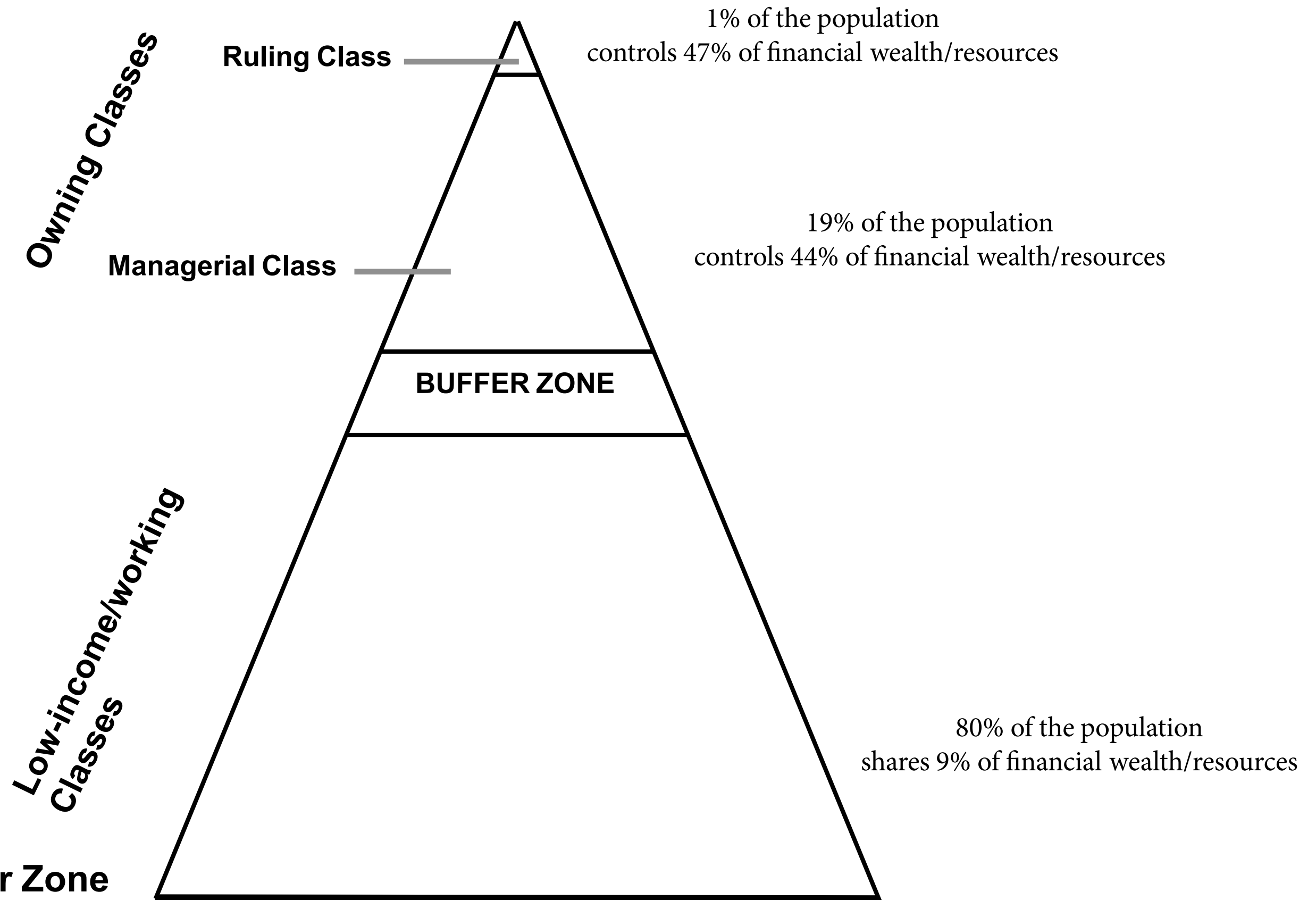
1% of the population
controls 47% of financial wealth/resources

Paul Kivel's The Buffer Zone









Owning Classes

Ruling Class

1% of the population
controls 47% of financial wealth/resources

Managerial Class

19% of the population
controls 44% of financial wealth/resources

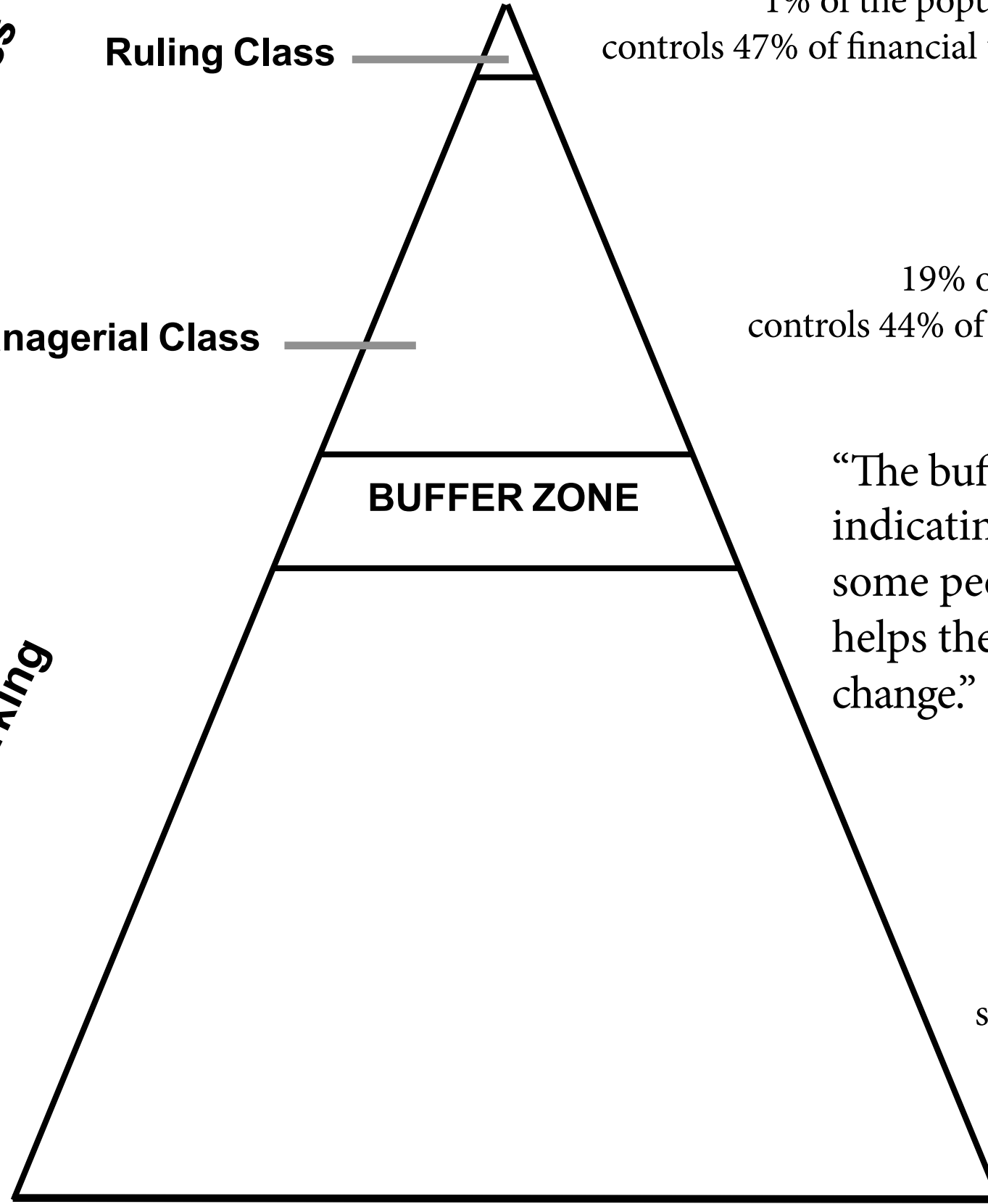
BUFFER ZONE

“The buffer zone is not an economic position,
indicating income or wealth; it is a role that
some people perform through their work that
helps the systems run smoothly and without
change.”
-Paul Kivel

**Low-income/working
Classes**

80% of the population
shares 9% of financial wealth/resources

Paul Kivel's The Buffer Zone



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- .Jobs that structurally serve to maintain the wealth and power of the ruling class
- .Acts as a buffer between those at the top of the economic pyramid and those at the bottom.

Three functions:

1. Take care of people at the bottom of the pyramid
2. Keep alive the myth that “anyone can make it”
3. Control those who want to make changes



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As sociologist Janet Poppendieck comments in her study of the emergency food system, the Buffer Zone:

- Relieves pressure
- Reduces discomfort, offering ways of participating (non-profit industrial complex)
- Creates culture of charity--normalizes destitution
- Makes it easier for government to shed responsibility
- Distracts (people) from the larger issues of distributional politics.
- Masks inadequate distribution

Sweet Charity?: Emergency Food and the End of Entitlement. by Janet Poppendieck. 1998.
pp. 5-6.



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What is my relationship to the buffer zone?

How does my role help maintain an economic system of extreme injustice?

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Historical Context

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Feudal System in Medieval Europe



.“Land bondage” form of slavery

.Serfs served an overlord in exchange for land & land was passed down through families.

.Everyone had shared use of “the commons” - lakes, woods and land. These were the material foundation of peasant solidarity and community.

From: *Caliban and the Witch: Women, The Body and Primitive Accumulation* by Sylvia Federici

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Women in Medieval Europe



.Women were especially dependent on the commons for “subsistence, autonomy and sociality.”

.At this time, women were fairly equal contributors to economic life. Their knowledge, especially in areas of health, was crucial to the well-being of communities.

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Class Warfare in Medieval Europe



- .7th-14th centuries marked by intense class warfare
- .Waves of peasant uprisings with huge gains: increased access to land, decreased work hours
- .Counter-revolutions of the Church and the wealthy pushing the peasants back down

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Reproductive Control & Witch Hunts



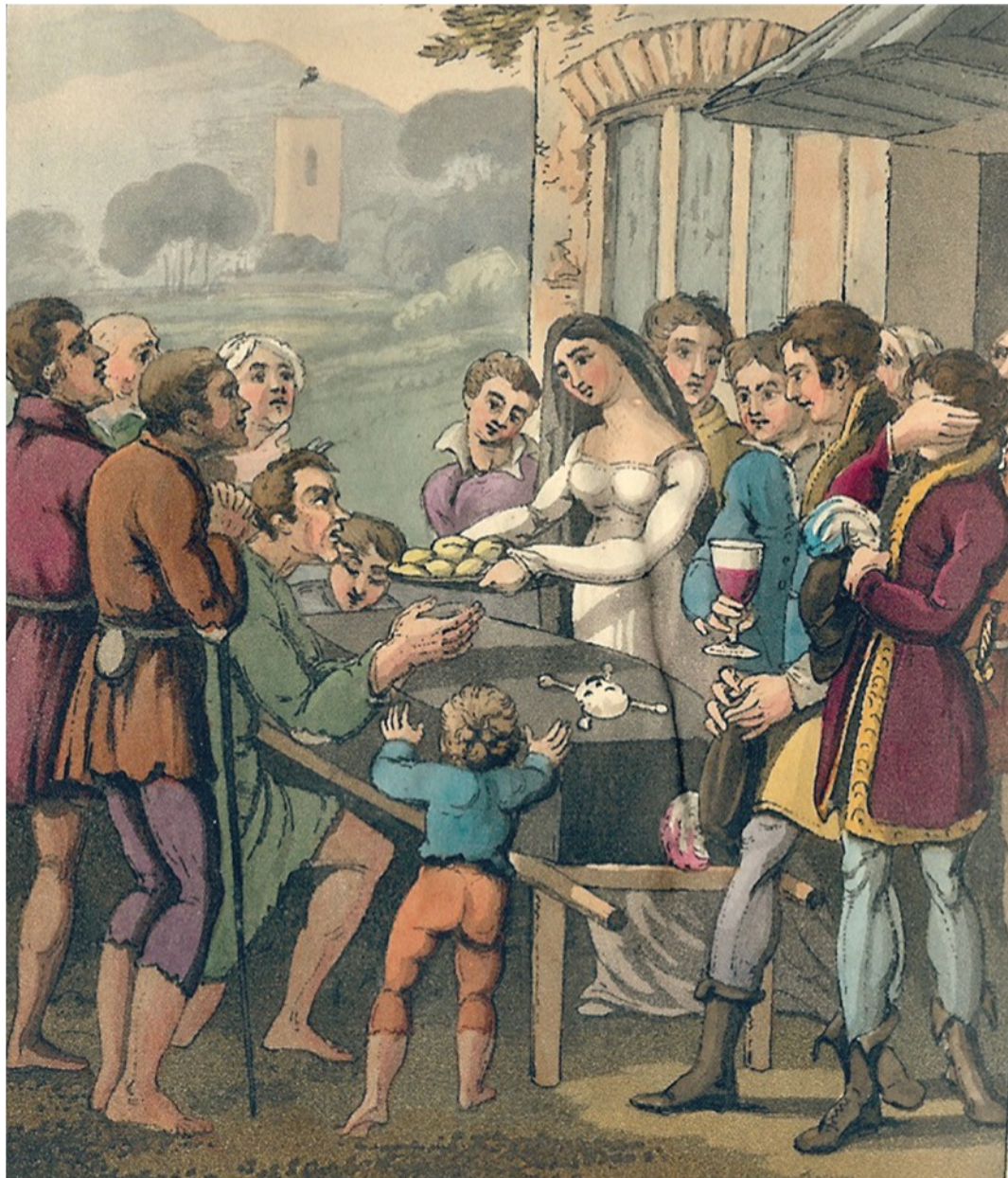
Working class power came largely from the commons & women's self-control of the population.

Any resistance was labeled “heresy” and led to genocide of the working class (through the Inquisition & Witch hunts)

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Transition to Capitalism & the Welfare State



Land privatization, agrarian capitalism, commercial farms and professional militaries began in the 15thc. Less than a century later, 60 towns had instituted some form of social assistance, vagabondage had become an international problem & rural populations were starving.

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Women further controlled & objectified



.15th century also marked by decriminalization of rape, creation of municipal brothels, exclusion of women from waged labor & the role of white woman as “savior.”

.Assumptions of “nature” developed to naturalize exploitation, deny women access to waged work, limit them to reproductive, sexual and charity work and pathologize resistance.



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How does this show up today?

Women in Helping Professions:

- 91% of registered nurses
- 81% elementary school teachers
- 68% social & community service managers
- 66% human resource managers



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White Female Savior Complex



The idea that what a white women has to offer is better than what others have and she should share it.

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Some Challenges of the WFSC

- .Assumes that it is always white womens’ role to help and that white womens’ help is always a good thing.
- .Reinforces white, colonial “norms.”
- .Turns pain into a commodity.
- .Distorts/appropriates/invisibilizes the stories and experiences of those “being saved.”
- .Uses caretaking to bypass being in touch with our own difficult emotions and leads to an imbalance of giving/receiving care.
- .Perpetuates a myth/focus on how much “the individual can do” that takes away from focus on the system.

Acknowledgments to Stacey Gibson for this framing

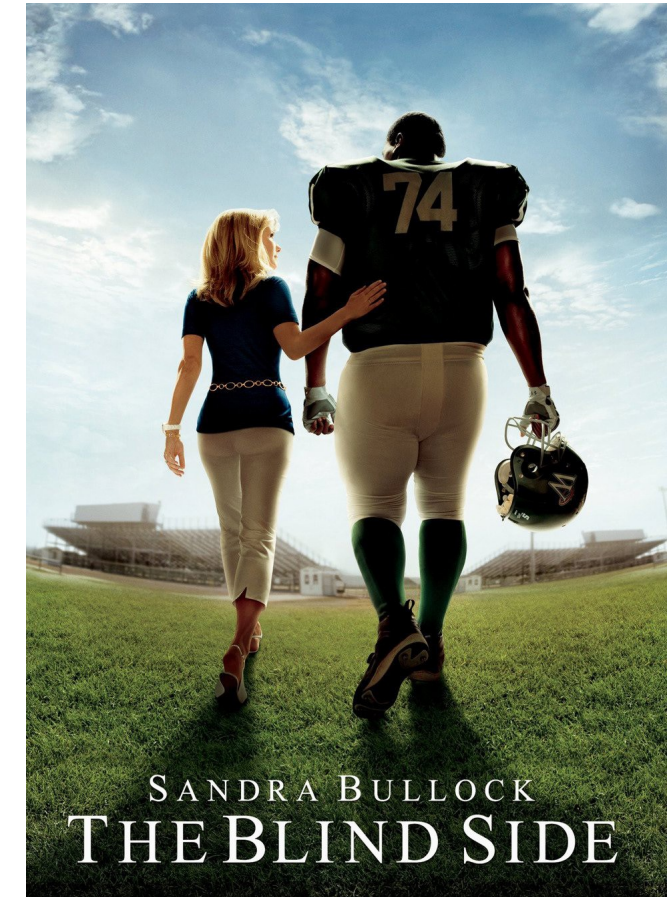
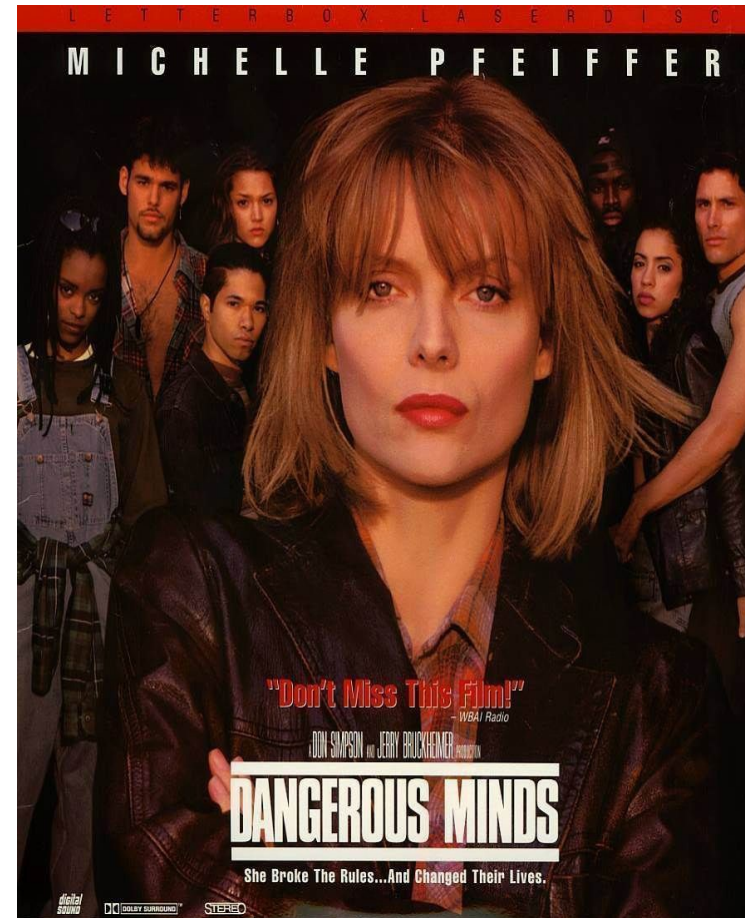


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In effect, the “white woman” has become the:

- storyteller
- translator
- savior
- enforcer
- silencer
- sanitizer

...of the stories and experiences of others.



*“Identifying so readily with the pain, the oppressor exists in place of the other and their complicity and privilege is obscured”
-Sharene Razack*

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The Buffer Zone and White Supremacy Culture

White women uphold white supremacy by perpetuating:

- Paternalism [Maternalism]
- Sense of urgency
- Fear of open conflict
- Quantity over quality
- Power hoarding
- Progress is bigger, more
- Worship of the written word
- Objectivity

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Reflection on “The Buffer Zone”

How can we do work “in the buffer” that is transformative, accountable and challenges systems of oppression instead of maintaining them?

What potentials and models exist for subversion within the buffer zone to shake the system towards greater equity and justice?

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Reflections continued...

- What would I do differently if I had nothing to lose?
- What would I do differently if I was not constrained by my role/position/job?
- What do I have to lose?
- What would I do differently if I wasn't exhausted doing it all?
- If I could create social change anyway I wanted to (money was no problem) what would I do?
- What is the change I want to see in the world, how am I working against it, how am I working towards it?
- What barriers (internal / external) are in the way of me bringing my vision to fruition?

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Additional Responses from “The Buffer Zone”

- .Learn to accept leadership from people of color
- .Break down the narratives, beware of ‘nice white lady,’ ‘white savior’ and other colonial impulses
- .Set boundaries, make time for creativity and learning
- .Recognize our spheres of influence and start the difficult conversations whenever we can
- .Don’t work in isolation, identify communities, and remember impact is collective and generational
- .Develop humility and keep sense of entitlement in check - “You won’t be needed by the movement until you understand that you’re not needed by the movement.”

Undoing White Supremacy

Cultural Element	ANTIDOTE
Paternalism	Include people affected by decisions in decision making process
Sense of urgency	Realistic work plans, funding proposals. Take time to be inclusive.
Fear of open conflict	Encourage difficult conversations
Quantity over quality	Value process and measure process goals, go off agenda
Power hoarding	Power sharing—develop power and skills of others.
Progress is bigger, more	Consider all costs, Seventh Generation Thinking
Worship of the written word	Value many ways to get to the same goal. It doesn't have to be in a memo to exist!!
Objectivity	Acknowledging and valuing diverse perspectives. Create space for multiple world views.

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