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Without Bureaucracy, Beyond Inclusion: Re-centering Feminism

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Both scholars and activists have tended to periodize the feminist movement into the so-called first, second, and third waves of feminism. The "first wave" is characterized by the white suffragette movement; the "second wave" is characterized by the formation of the National Organization for Women, abortion rights politics, and the fight for the Equal Rights Amendments. Suddenly, as if having no prior organizing history, women of color make an appearance during the "third wave," transforming feminism into a multicultural movement.

But the problems with this approach become clear when acknowledging that the histories of feminism extend beyond these narrow waves. For example, if one were to develop a feminist history centering Native women, feminist history in this country would start in 1492 with the resistance to patriarchal colonization. The insistence on a first, second, and third wave approach toward understanding feminism therefore keeps white feminism at the center of our analysis and organizing practice.

Consequently, many analyses of "the women's movement" tend to focus on liberal white feminist organizations that emerged during the "second wave." Critics, such as Barbara Epstein and others, point to the fact that these organizations have come to function less as movements and more as bureaucratic non-profits who do advocacy work without any substantial grassroots base. Rather than assert a politics of long-term social transformation, these groups focus on lobbying the state through issue-specific reform.

On the one hand, as William Saletan of Slate Magazine notes, this approach has worked for certain issues. He contends that pro-choice strategists -- generally affiliated with NARAL Pro-Choice America and Planned Parenthood -- intentionally chose to reject a reproductive rights-based framework in favor of one that focused on privacy from "big government." That is, the government should not have the right to intervene on the right to decide if they want to have children. This approach appealed to those with libertarian sensibilities who otherwise might have no sympathy with feminist causes. The impact of this strategy was that it enabled the pro-choice side to keep *Roe v. Wade* intact, but only in the most narrow of senses.

Ultimately, the logic behind this approach could be used against a broader pro-choice agenda. For instance, the argument that government should not be involved in reproductive rights decisions could then be used by pro-life advocates against federal funding for abortions because government supposedly has no business in providing funding for abortion services.

Co-optation blues

For the anti-violence movement, the shift toward bureaucratization coincided with the influx of federal and state dollars into anti-violence programs, particularly with the Violence Against Women Act. Anti-violence groups then began to shift their focus from anti-violence organizing to anti-violence support services. With the restrictions that federal monies often place on the type of work anti-violence groups can do, their work became state-friendly (such as calling for increased criminalization of domestic and sexual violence) rather than state-resistant (such as violence-prevention initiatives or alternatives to incarceration).

Thus began an increasing split between groups that do organizing and groups that meet the immediate needs of their constituents. This split can be seen as rendered in that organizing spaces devolved into masculinist public spaces where

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gendered in that organizing spaces devolved into masculinist public spaces where everyone is supposed to be healthy with no problems. Personal problems became relegated to a private space, implying that one is supposed to get help on their own time, disconnected from a larger political organizing framework.

This depoliticized personal work has therefore become a main focus of a co-opted feminist movement. While “the personal is political” was one mantra of the many in the women’s movement, the political has in many ways become personal. That is, instead of looking at the personal as the basis to do political organizing work, many groups stayed simply at the level of personal development or support groups.

The fracture between the personal and political, services and organizing, has meant that instead of women and survivors of violence becoming agents for solving problems, they receive apolitical “self-help” and a band-aid of social services.

Currently, many right-wing individuals hold prominent positions within domestic and sexual violence agencies with no commitment to feminist politics whatsoever. In fact, anti-violence activist Beth Richie is completing a book in which she talks about how “we won the mainstream and lost the movement.” In light of these trends, one could become very depressed about the women’s movement. However, this depression assumes these corporate-model non-profits are the center of the women’s movement.

Beyond inclusion

There have been numerous multi-racial and multi-national women’s anthologies calling for a radical transformation of the mainstream women’s movement.

Experiencing the multiple realities of sexism, racism, classism, (and other “isms”), women of color are often uniquely situated to see the need to organize against oppression on numerous levels. They are the targets of violence directed at communities of color, and at the same time are targeted by violence committed within communities of color. This positionality allows them to see the need to develop a dual-organizing response that creates and restores healthy communities while resisting white supremacy, capitalism, and oppression. By contrast, male-dominated racial justice groups and white-dominated feminist groups tend to focus on singular and either external or internal oppressions, rather than dealing with all simultaneously.

But by and large, the response of white liberal feminist groups to these “multicultural” challenges has been simply to “multiculturalize” their organizations; that is, they welcome “third wave” women of color and other marginalized women into their ranks as long as the multicultural difference they make has no significance for how these organizations will define the work. Inclusivity has therefore come to mean that we start with an organizing model developed with white, middle-class people in mind, and then simply add a multicultural component to it.

This approach also contributes to dysfunctional organizing patterns in which women of color, poor women, etc., often find ourselves spending inordinate amounts of time trying to influence the large liberal feminist organizations such as NOW and NARAL, as if they embody the women’s movement. This can be called the “women of color caucus” approach to politics, whereby a caucus is formed within a larger organization or an independent group is developed that focuses solely on allying with the larger organizations.

Our work then becomes focused on yelling at white women for being racist. And if we become very good at this task, white women start paying us to yell at them. This approach can be lucrative for some individual women of color, but does not actually impact the political direction of these bureaucratic organizations. More significantly, this work does not help women of color organizing build its own power.

Re-centering feminism

By implying that they are part of a “third wave” of feminism—a notion that still centers the histories of white middle-class women—feminists of color can be self-marginalizing. Without focusing on developing our own independent and alternative power base, women of color organizations are not in positions to negotiate with power brokers and mainstream pro-choice organizations, or to hold them accountable.



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hold them accountable.

For example, many women of color groups mobilized to attend the 2004 March for Women's Lives in Washington, DC, in order to expand the focus of the march from a narrow pro-choice abortion rights agenda to a broad-based reproductive rights agenda. While this broader agenda was reflected in the march, it became co-opted by the pro-choice paradigm in the narrow media coverage. Virtually no newspaper described the march as anything other than a pro-choice, abortion rights march. To quote New Orleans health activist Barbara Major, "When you go to power without a base, your demand becomes a request." Without a base of radical women of color, lobbying bigwig feminist organizations can be a disempowering plea.

As critical race theorist Kimberle Crenshaw has noted, it is not enough to be sensitive to difference; we must ask what difference the difference makes. Instead of saying, how can we include women of color, women with disabilities, etc., we must ask what our analysis and organizing practice would look like if we centered them in it. By following a politics of re-centering rather than inclusion, we often find that we see the issue differently, not just for the group in question, but everyone.

An example of this re-centering is the way the national organization, INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, developed its analysis of domestic and sexual violence. We saw that it did not make sense to focus our strategies on involving the criminal justice system in addressing violence, because as women of color we are just as victimized by the criminal justice system as we are by interpersonal gender violence in our communities.

In coming up with alternatives, some people thought we should involve the medical system as part of an anti-violence strategy. However, when we re-centered the discussion around women with disabilities, we saw that the medical system was as punitive as the criminal justice system, and we needed to work on developing alternative strategies. In the end, neither the criminal justice nor the medical system was going to solve the problem of violence for anyone, not just for women with disabilities and women of color.

Building autonomy

Many grassroots organizations are posing important challenges to how radical women of color should position themselves vis-à-vis the liberal feminist establishment. Fundamentally, these new projects and analyses do not start from or solely identify with the history and establishments of white liberal feminism.

Basing their origins of feminism on the resistance to European colonialism, The Native Feminisms Without Apology project, for example, is not particularly concerned with allying, critiquing, or relating itself to liberal feminist organizations. Many other grassroots organizations such as Sisters in Action for Power in Portland and Sista II Sista in Brooklyn, are developing radical responses to issues like violence that are not filtered through the mainstream reproductive justice or anti-violence organizations.

These projects are reunifying the personal and political, and struggling to provide immediate services in empowering forms, as well as building collective political strength. The Boarding School Healing Project, based on developing a movement of survivors of American Indian Boarding Schools, is working to heal deep trauma but resisting the temptation to simply provide services and then organize. Otherwise, one member says, "It will be like we're just doing something to survivors again, instead of doing something with them."

Radical women of color organizations are also grappling with structures of collectivity and accountability. In the face of the shift to top-down, bureaucratic structures of organizing, yet with the knowledge that unstructured leadership can lead to unspoken hierarchies, these groups are working to make accountable and egalitarian leadership a reality rather than simply a principle.

The focus on building autonomous power does not imply separatism. In fact, this model of radical women of color organizing is not simply based on a narrow politics of identity but more on a set of political practices designed to eliminate the interlocking systems of oppression based on heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, capitalism and colonialism—a vision that is liberating for all peoples. Unlike the demobilizing reformism of the mainstream women's movement, this organizing is about asserting power and taking responsibility for transforming the

world. As Native feminist activist Justine Smith stated: "You can't win a revolution on your own. And we are about nothing short of a revolution. Anything else is just not worth our time."

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