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How Women Of Color Feminists Enabled Coalitional Members to Work Across Difference

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How Women Of Color Feminists Enabled Coalitional Members to Work Across Difference

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
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of Loyola Marymount University

by

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Abstract

This research analyzes different theories of coalition in relation to the feminist movement. It first analyzes the model of a leftist hegemony as a type of coalitional model theorized by Laclau and Mouffe. Laclau and Mouffe move outside of a Marxist paradigm by acknowledging that unjust social conflicts exist beyond class. They theorize that a coalition based on multiple groups of oppressed people coming together in the name of liberty and equality will be enough to address sexism. Their model does not account for the inevitable factions that would exist within such a large coalition. The ethical component Laclau and Mouffe are missing can be found in the works of women of color feminists. The research then turns to women of color feminists and analyzes the different ethical components of coalition they developed and why. The research looks to the works of Maria Lugones in which she argues that playfulness, empathy, and self-reflection are necessities of coalitions, a speech spoken by Bernice Johnson Reagan in which she theorizes coalition as a dangerous place that people must be willing to suffer through for survival, interviews with Audre Lorde in which she speaks to the need of self-acceptance and love in a coalition, and work by Mari Matsuda in which she argues that coalitions need to be open-ended and must have a foundation of trust. Examination of their works show that there are multiple working models of feminist coalitions but that a comprehensive coalition theory requires a model of how coalitional members should interact with each other.

Intro

Laclau and Mouffe theorized their model of coalition as an leftist political party composed of multiple groups of people fighting against different types of oppression. Marx developed a theory of class politics that consisted of the proletariat uniting to fight for their rights against the bourgeoisie. Laclau and Mouffe's coalitional model improved on Marx's theory because their model acknowledges that there are other types of oppressive social divisions besides class. However, their vision is primarily limited in two ways. The hegemony they describe simply makes the move from class party politics to leftist party politics; it fails to move beyond party politics. Furthermore, Laclau and Mouffe's model also requires that various social groups come together, but does not acknowledge how those groups will realistically work together and stay unified beyond a general commitment to the ideals of liberty and equality. They establish no operational framework for how their leftist political party will operate.

Women of color feminists place an emphasis on intersectionality. Similarly to Laclau and Mouffe they do not believe that a movement can only exist on one front. As the Combahee River Collective states, "We realize that the liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy... We are not convinced, however, that a socialist revolution that is not also a feminist and antiracist revolution will guarantee our liberation" (213) The question then becomes, do women of color feminists run into the same problems the Laclau and Mouffe model ran into of solely relying on a commitment to liberty and equality?

Alongside theoretical works of Laclau and Mouffe and women of color feminists, there are also empirical examples of coalition spaces that can be analyzed for a coalition model. The Combahee River Collective, CLASSE, and the coalition simulation from the Feminism and Coalition class at Loyola Marymount University were coalitions that explored the issues of what is necessary to keep a social justice coalition together. The Combahee River Collective wrote a Black Feminist Statement in which they say that they are working towards the oppression of all people, but that they believe that there needed to be specific attention to Black women. In their efforts to specifically examine the multiplicity of Black women's oppressions, they faced a cost or social sanctions from their peers when they tried to work with Black men or the white women who dominated most feminist spaces at the time (Combahee 213-214). They were open to working with other coalitions, movements, and organizations, but they also felt that there needed to be a specific space for Black Feminists to come together. Combahee was committed to doing the political work of struggling against oppression within their coalition (210).

The Coalition Simulation was formed from a group of students who took a class together in which they analyzed coalition and feminist theory while also creating their own coalition. The members met in person weekly as well as wrote a journal together in which each of them wrote weekly posts based on their experiences in the coalition. Their journal culminated in a manifesto that was written as a group. As the coalition went on, the members developed an operational model for that exemplified their political commitment of fighting institutional oppression which they outlined in their manifesto. Through the statements, manifestos, and chronological documentation of the Combahee River Collective and the Coalition Simulation, it

is made apparent that those coalitions had a commitment to multiple social justice fronts and recognized the importance of developing ways to work across difference.

Through this paper I will prove that it is necessary for coalitions to address multiple social justice issues, but that coalitional work can only be done if there is an ethical framework. I will show that Laclau and Mouffe advance coalition theory by developing a theory that allows for multiple social justice issues to be addressed within one space. I will then go on to show that although they advanced coalitional theory, their theory remains incomplete because it does not include an ethical framework that would allow various social groups to work within one space. Next, I will examine the works of the Combahee River Collective, Bernice Johnson Reagan, and the Coalition Simulation to provide evidence that coalitions needs an ethical framework. Finally, I will look to different women of color feminists to showcase different ethical frameworks developed for coalitional theories. I will look at the different ethical frameworks that consist of embracing difference, using empathy accompanied with self-reflection, love, and trust.

1. Critique of Laclau and Mouffe:

1.1 Moving Beyond Class but Staying within Party Politics

Laclau and Mouffe were building off of Marxist theories of social change, but stayed within a Marxist framework. "This change introduced by Marxism into the political principal of social division maintains unaltered an essential component of the Jacobin imaginary: the postulation of one foundational moment of rupture and of a unique space in which the political constituted" (152). One of the primary differences between their social change theory and Marx's is that they do not believe the strict categories of the proletariat and the bourgeois are

adequate enough to describe the full scope of societal conflicts that exist. As they say, the world has “many social antagonisms, many issues which are crucial to the understanding of contemporary societies belong to fields of discursivity which are external to Marxism, and cannot be reconceptualized in terms of Marxist categories” (Laclau and Mouffe ix). Their vision of a leftist hegemony is limited to the political. Marx asserted that people would learn to identify and organize around their positions in regards to the means of production. He thought people would classify themselves as either members of the bourgeoisies or the proletariat and that there would be a proletariat political conquest. Laclau and Mouffe assert that people should classify themselves as oppressed and subordinated groups and that oppressed people should seek political conquest. Their desire is for people to gather together and learn to fight oppressions no longer on the basis of particular issues, but on the overarching principals of liberty and equality. They want different social movements on the left to abandon their fragmentation and move towards a singular identity of subjugated people.

They advocate for a “‘radical and plural democracy’ conceived as a new stage in the deepening of the ‘democratic revolution’ as the extension of the democratic struggles for equality and liberty to a wider range of social relations” (xv). Laclau and Mouffe articulate their vision when they say, one “One of the central tenants of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* “is the need to create a chain of equivalence among the various democratic struggles against different forms of subordination. They argued that struggles against sexism, racism, sexual discrimination, and in the defense of the environment needed to be articulated with those of the workers in a new left-wing hegemonic project” (xvii). They believed that a revolution could not be based simply on class identity because those identities were unstable and did not

encompass all forms of oppression. Their alternative was to propose was a leftist hegemony made up of a chain of subordinate group's one group will come to represent them all.

As stated previously, Laclau and Mouffe move away from class by including social antagonisms beyond class, but they are still working within a Marxist framework that women of color feminists move beyond. Laclau and Mouffe imagine their leftist hegemony as a collective group that works towards realizing the ideals of liberty and equality through democratic action. They imagined a group composed of people who would align and stay together because they are against oppression and they all fight together for the general principles of equality and liberty. They acknowledge that the multiplicity of oppressions within their leftist political movement would lead to at least one struggle, the struggle to find a leader to represent the group, but besides that they seemed to ignore the difficulties that would come with different oppressed groups attempting to be completely united. LaClau and Mouffe do not adequately address how all of those people will stay together and that they do not establish any type of workable ethical theory of coalition.

1.2. The Challenges of Working Across Difference

A lack of an ethical framework makes it almost impossible for a coalition of diverse members to work. Laclau and Mouffe ignored this, but through analyzing the works of people who were actually engaged in coalition, it becomes apparent why a lack of an ethical framework renders Laclau and Mouffe's theory incomplete. A lack of a strong ethical model for how a coalition should operate will often result in oppression within a coalition. Without guidelines on how members should interact with each other and how members can work

across differences, certain members or social groups may become ignored or invisible in the coalition and the concerns of people who experience different types of oppression might be treated less seriously by people who do not understand that type of oppression. The experiences of women in the Combahee River Collective, Bernice Reagon Johnson, and the Coalitional Simulation will illustrate the different pitfalls of coalitional work without ethics.

1.2.1 The Combahee River Collective

Many women of color found barriers when they tried to be a part of the general feminist movement so they felt the need to form coalitions composed of women of color. Women of color feminists, whether they were primarily involved in women of color coalitions or general feminist coalitions, found that there was still variation within the group of people they were working with. They developed theories relating to the ethics of coalition to address the sometimes hostile differences women need to work across to make coalitions work. In the Black Feminist Statement, the Combahee River Collective stated, "It was our experience and disillusionment within these [Black and Women's] liberation movements, as well as experience on the periphery of the white male left, that led to the need to develop a politic that was antiracist, unlike those of white women, and antisexist, unlike those of Black and white men" (Combahee 211). The Combahee River Collective formed because they felt like they were on the margins of the feminist movement, the anti-racism movement, and movements centered on class oppression. The larger leftist alliances they were involved in did not support the voices and opinions brought forth by Black Feminists, so the women who formed the Collective turned to the solution of creating their own space; only in that space could the women tackle the intersecting oppressions that they felt. The women who formed the Collective did so because

there was not a sufficient ethical framework in the coalition they originally tried to be a part of. If the anti-racist and the feminist movements at the time had a stronger ethical commitment that allowed people to work across difference, it is possible that the Collective would not have needed to be formed. The Collective started meeting in 1974. In the early 1980's, another Black feminist would speak to the tensions and challenges of working across difference.

1.2.2 Bernice Reagon Johnson

Along with the women involved in the Combahee River Collective, Bernice Johnson Reagon also experienced the difficulties of coalition work firsthand. A few years after the collective started meeting, Johnson would give a speech at a women's festival on the nature of coalition work. In her early 1980's speech, she would go on to say "I feel as if I'm going to keel over any minute and die" (356). Reagon describes coalitional experiences as inherently difficult, unpleasant, and threatening work that people engage in because they need each for survival and to advanced shared principals. She wanted people involved in coalitional efforts to understand that coalitions should not feel like homes because they are not created to make people feel comfortable.

Romand Coles would later go on to analyze her speech and suggest that it is not easy when people who are subjugated in different ways attempt to coalesce together. Reagon, the Combahee River Collective, and Coles see what Laclau and Mouffe failed to recognize; coalition work is not simple or easy.

Working to build coalitions of diverse groups is often
fundamentally threatening because many of the perspectives and

practices that we take to be essentially constitutive and unquestionable aspects of our identity are challenged by others, who explicitly or tacitly suggest that what we hold dear is in fact trivial, illusory, oppressive, obnoxious, slave-like, unhealthy, and on and on. The limits and contingencies of our personal and group identities as well as the recalcitrance of others even to consider us seriously, let alone embrace our visions and ideals, are placed before us with a depth and frequency that can take one's breath away. If it does not, Reagon suggests, the kind of encounter in and from which a meaningful and rich coalition politics might develop is probably being avoided. (Coles 377)

1.2.3 Coalition Simulation

In some ways the coalition is not a direct parallel to other real life coalitions because it was minimally guided and somewhat artificial being it was a class. Nonetheless it was still a gathering of multiple people who were interested in fighting sexist oppression and who believed in the values of liberty and equality. During the first meeting, the 13 member coalition was initially instructed to choose an issue to coalesce around and to develop goals around the issue and to attempt to achieve those goals. These proved to be difficult tasks. The coalition decided to make human trafficking its issue. The coalition struggled to identify concrete goals, but settled on learning about the issue, raising awareness about the issue, and politically advocating on behalf of the issue. Even though the coalition decided on those goals there were disagreements about how valuable each of those goals were and different levels of

commitment to completing those goals. The experience of choosing a specific topic and establishing goals proved to be a trying experience for the members. One member wrote in the Coalition Simulation Journal about the challenges of the first week.

“There was certainly a good deal of chaos in attempting a fluid first conversation among our coalition, I believe this is a pretty natural occurrence and an experience to be learned from. I’m assuming it’s also natural to have a range of semi-negative emotions about how the conversation went, post-event...

Practically speaking, the experience of taking part in an ongoing series of coalition meetings isn’t only intellectually challenging, but emotionally challenging as well.”(Coalition Simulation 103)

During a meeting when members were asked to share how they were affected by the issue, only one person expressed that they had a deep and personal connection to the issue. The subsequent week the coalition decided to abandon the issue of human trafficking somewhat because they felt they were being unproductive and because there was too much division on the issue. The catalyst for this change in topic came when a member expressed that as the only person personally affected by the issue she felt like the coalition was discussing the issue from a perspective that was insensitive to those who actually experienced it. She stated that being the only person in the group to experience the issue put her in an uncomfortable position in the coalition. As one person recounted “in addition to one of our members

confessing that our topic was very triggering to her and she felt that she was the only one with a semi-close connection to the topic which made her feel alone and hesitant to share (30).

The coalition still had the instructions to choose an issue, but the members decided they would take a different approach to choosing a new issue. They decided to all write down forms of oppression that they had personally experienced, to converse about the list, and to choose an issue from that conversation. Different members of the coalition struggled to work across their differences in opinion and personal experiences

“Even when we were sharing our connections to human trafficking there was a clear divide amongst the passion from the people who were directly affected by it and those who were not...Also, while I appreciate the passion, I do think we need to find an effective way of communicating our disagreements. I understand that this process will be an emotional one full of heated discussion (just as it should be!) but the screaming and shouting made me feel uncomfortable. Everyone should have the right to express their opinion, regardless if it does not align with a majority of the people in the class. I would hate for someone to feel like they should refrain from saying something out of fear of being yelled at. Although I would describe myself as a feminist there are many feminist issue and topics, where i am admittedly very ignorant, which is why I am taking this class. I am here to learn and would rather feel like someone is

informing me about something that I was unclear on, than feel like I am being attacked..." (31)

We spent the rest of our meeting time sharing our stories of catcalling and how it may/may not be sexual harassment, and whether or not it would be possible to make it a crime. Some individuals were much more passionate about it, namely the women in the group, and we pretty much determined that the men in the room weren't as emotionally involved because they had not experienced it. (32)

The members of the group came to the conclusion that they could not all bond over one common form of oppression. The apparent consensus of the group was that there were too many divergences of opinion and diverging levels of personal connection to the different forms of oppression that were listed, but everyone had experienced oppression. In her blog post titled Meeting #6, Xicana describes how and why the coalition decided to make oppression the overarching issue.

During meeting six of our coalition we found that the experience of oppression is something we all have in common. This whole time we had been searching for something to agree on and I think we might have found it. That is, though we all experience different levels and forms of oppression, we all have some sort of experience with oppression. Oppression allows us to build bridges with amongst each other.(52)

Similar to the leftist hegemony described in Laclau and Mouffe, the group decided that they needed to recognize and address a plurality of social antagonism. Instead of coalescing around a single narrow issue, they agreed on a shared committed to tackling oppression, but when the coalition had not yet developed an ethical commitment, people were afraid to share, felt attacked, and felt like the time spent in the coalition was unproductive.

Similar to how Laclau and Mouffe wanted to broaden a political movement to be about more than class, the coalition wanted to broaden and become inclusive. Unlike the leftist hegemony described in Laclau and Mouffe, the coalition is not a political party. Even though oppression was chosen as the new issue, the coalition did not establish many (or any) goals to accomplish. The work of the coalition was focused inward and not towards affecting political changes outside of the group.

As the next couple of meetings unfolded, it became clear that there were still diverging opinions on oppression and what it meant to combat it. As the leftist coalition continued, the group experienced problems that Laclau and Mouffe do not address. The two main problems that the coalition experienced were that coalition members had different definitions of oppression and social antagonisms and some members felt oppressed by each other. Even in the context of fighting oppression in its entirety, members in the coalition had trouble understanding relating to the experiences of other. Laclau and Mouffe do not offer an outline for how their leftist hegemony will deal with those types of issues. Intersectional thinkers offer more, and somewhat contradicting, thoughts situations similar to the ones experienced in the coalition

2. Women of Color and Ethical Solutions

As established previously, coalitional models need an ethical framework so that different groups of people can work together and stay unified. In the introduction, the question was posed, do women of color feminists run into the same problems the Laclau and Mouffe model ran into of solely relying on a commitment to liberty and equality? The answer is no. Women of color feminists do not solely rely on a political commitment; they also recognize the necessity of an ethics to the coalitions they belong to. A coalition of people who align together because they realize they all experience forms of oppression and they want to work towards liberty and equality may be possible, but only if there is an ethics to that coalition. Similar to Laclau and Mouffe, women of color feminists intersecting oppressions can be addressed within an individual coalitional the space. In fact most of them think that coalitions need to be capable of advocating against multiple forms of oppressions to be effective but they imagine those coalitional spaces to existing with an ethical framework that enables coalition members to work across difference.

2.1 Embracing Difference

Audre Lorde thins one of the primary requirements of working in coalition is that coalitional member be willing to recognize and embrace the differences that exist between them.

Difference must not be merely tolerated but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like dialectic. Only then does the necessity for interdependency become unthreatening. Only within that interdependency of

different strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways of being in the world generate as well as the courage and sustenance to act where there are no charters.

(Lorde 2)

Audre Lorde sees the value in recognizing sameness, but in order for people to truly work together she thinks that people need to be willing to embrace their differences. Whereas Laclau and Mouffe want people from multiple subjugated groups to subsume themselves under one identity of oppressed people who want liberty and equality. Lorde thinks there is more value in acknowledging difference.

2.2 Working Across Differences Through Empathy Complimented with Self Reflection

The first set of ethical strategies women of color offer are ways members can use empathy and self-reflection to understand and connect with one another. Maria Lugones establishes the concept of traveling to someone else's world and becoming faithful witnesses while Romand Coles thinks that embedded in Bernice Reagon Johnson speech is an ethics of receptive generosity.

Lugones offers one of the most concrete ethical solutions to help coalitional members work across difference through her concepts of traveling and self-reflection. Lugones states that people must be willing to look into a mirror, a mirror that will not necessarily show them who they are actually are, but will show them as "one of the people you are" (72). She describes traveling as "the shift from being one person to being a different person" (89). To put

her concept in colloquial terms, she wants people to try to “walk in someone else’s shoes.”

Lugones goes on to state why traveling becomes so important when she states, “Only through this traveling to her ‘world’ Could I identify with her because only then could I cease to ignore her and to be excluded and separate from her” (86). She also says, “The reason I think that traveling to someone’s ‘world’ is a way of identifying with them is that by traveling to their ‘world’ we can understand what it is to be them and what it is to be ourselves in their eyes” (97). Lugones is saying that people need to travel to someone else’s world in order to understand where they are coming from, to truly connect with them, and to gain a better perspective of where they stand in relation to that person. Once they see themselves from someone else’s perspective they can become faithful witnesses who have a better understanding of their role in cultural and social institutions. They will become more informed about forms of oppression, domination, and resistance; they may even discover new ways that they have been oppressed or ways they have oppressed others. As faithful witnesses, coalitional members will be willing to fight against oppression and will learn to sense resistance, even when it may be uncomfortable for them as opposed to a collaborative witness who refuses to challenge oppression. The act of looking into a mirror, traveling, and becoming a faithful witness involve the willingness to see others and to see yourself from a different perspective. Maria Lugones also describes a specific type of traveling and working across difference which she describes as playfulness. She describes playing as an active engagement between different people willing to make themselves uncomfortable in order to gain understanding and bonding. For her this willingness to engage in discomfort is playful because it requires being open to surprises” (95). Similar to Bernice Reagan Johnson, Lugones recognizes

that being involved in a coalition requires members to encounter opinions and perspectives that they are uncomfortable with hearing. Lugones does not want coalitional members prepare for battle or feel like they are entering into any type of win-lose combative situation when they encounter uncomfortable difference; she wants people to approach this discomfort with a playful attitude.

The Coalition Simulation also described an ethical framework they developed based on empathy. They documented their ethical guidelines in the manifesto they wrote.

We, the members of our feminist coalition at Loyola Marymount University, aim to fight institutional oppression. We use that as our shared political commitment and we express it through the ethics of our coalition. We recognize that one of the best ways and first step in fighting oppression is to learn about it from each other through dialogue...

We have developed an ethics for our coalition that enables us to better work together, to facilitate productive discussions, and to live out our ideal of a space free of oppression. Our ethics include having a non-hierarchical structure, an open dialogue in which every voice can be heard, practicing empathy towards each other, and treating each other with mutual respect. .. We insist on members of oppressed communities/identity groups having a voice within our space if resistance and action is to take place. (Coalition Simulation 2)

Similarly to Lugones, the members of the coalition believes that it was important for coalitional members to learn from each other's experiences. They believed that open-dialogue based on mutual respect and empathy was an important aspect of their coalition. The previous quotes from the coalition show that members felt like there was chaos and that there was risk of people being attacked. In their final manifesto, the members express that their ethical commitment allowed for increased cooperation and productivity.

2.3 Love and Lugones

Another ethical component that is described by women of color is love. Lugones and Audre Lorde both speak to the need for love in coalitional practices. When Lugones speaks of the need for traveling, she also mentions how love should be a part of the traveling experience. She says that when coalitional members travel to each other's worlds, they become dependent on each other because without the understanding that comes with traveling, members would be invisible, incomplete, separated, and alone(86). She argues that traveling with someone else in order to be complete requires love. She argues that it is loving perception that will allow feminist coalitional members to identify with each other in a way that will make them feel complete (82).

2.4 Trust

Matsuda's ethical answer to how a coalition should operate compliments Reagan's conceptualization of coalitions, but Matsuda places more of an emphasis on self-acceptance and love. Matsuda aligns with Reagan's theory of coalition in the way they both believe that people should not enter into coalitions looking for comfort or looking for a home; they both

think coalitions are difficult and at time inherently uncomfortable (63). She thinks coalitions are spaces for dialogue that challenges members' current ways of thinking, often through comparative analysis, so that they can learn about oppression on multiple levels. Her experiences in coalitions have resulted in her believing that coalitions are long, slow, open-ended, and difficult but she also argues that there needs to be a foundation of trust in order to get people to listen, learn, and form theory. Although she acknowledges that coalitions can be uncomfortable spaces, she thinks that there needs to be a comfortable foundation so that people are willing to fully share their experiences and thoughts.

Conclusion

Ultimately, women of color feminists have made the contribution of developing new ways to theorize about coalitions, by reframing theories on coalition to include the ethics of coalition. Coalitions can and should address multiple social justice issues, and it is an ethical framework that allows coalitions to do the work of addressing multiple issues. Laclau and Mouffe were important figures in advancing coalitional theory by developing a theory that allows for multiple social justice issues to be addressed within one space, but it was women of color feminists that filled in the gaps Laclau and Mouffe failed to address. Women of color feminists like Mari Matsuda, Audre Lorde, and Maria Lugones provided multiple types of ethical frameworks that could be used enabled coalition members to work across difference. It is their concepts of embracing difference, using empathy accompanied with self-reflection, love, and trust that will enabled coalition members to work together in addressing multiple social divisions.

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