FEMINIST ORGANIZATIONAL PRINCIPLES

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Abstract

In this essay on feminist organizational principles, we trace the development of key feminist concepts and illustrate how they are instantiated in feminist practices of governance, drawing on scholarly treatments, social movement organizing and other institutional settings. We begin by sketching concepts of power and empowerment, showing how the feminist understanding of these concepts, which draws on ideas of embodiment and social structures, undergirds

feminist approaches to politics and governance. As we trace the development of feminist organizational principles, we show how feminist theory and practice have worked together to offer models of intersectional, post-colonial organizing, models that draw on descriptive representation and self-organization as mechanisms to counter the distorting effect of power on deliberation, particularly to counter the silencing and marginalization of subaltern groups. An emphasis on the politics of presence (descriptive representation) and self-organization ground a feminist commitment to autonomous social movements as avenues for transformational political change.

Introduction

In this essay, we trace the development of feminist organizational concepts and practices, drawing out eight distinct principles of governance. We begin with sketching feminist concepts of power and empowerment, before turning to a discussion of how feminist theory and practice have worked together to offer models of intersectional, post-colonial organizing. These models aim to offset the distorting effect of power on deliberation and to counter the silencing and marginalization of subaltern groups.

Politics, power and empowerment

Traditional approaches to politics in political science emphasize distributive considerations, as in “who gets what, when, how” (Lasswell, 1936) or the authoritative allocation of value (Easton, 1953). Feminist approaches to politics encompass not only these issues of distributive justice, but also questions of power and empowerment, with distinctive approaches to both concepts. Feminist understanding of power is rooted in the idea of gender, a constellation of institutions that defines categories of sex and identity. Gender systems assign bodies to these categories, creating social groups. A particular gender regime empowers and elevates some groups and characteristics and excludes and undercuts others. The gender systems in place in most of the world elevate categories, groups and characteristics associated with men and the masculine and devalue women, the feminine and other categories, identities and characteristics who fall outside the binary schema that so dominates contemporary gender politics. The first principle

of feminist organizing is that it foregrounds gender as an axis of power and works to counter oppressive gendered power structures. Other principles of feminist organizing flow from this feminist approach to gender and power.

Power and gender are not features of bodies or individuals, but rather, are an aspect of social organization. Power names a relationship between groups, defined by institutional structures that constrain and enable agents to do particular types of things. Power relations are maintained and sustained by daily interactions at the micro-level as individuals reinforce norms, rules and laws through their compliance. Power is positional, not fungible, not a substance or amount that can be easily transferred (Young, [1990] 2011; Lloyd, 2013). Power works through bodies, though it is not a "thing" a person can give away or hold: A person cannot renounce their gender, race or class privilege or transfer it to others.

Feminists expand the notion of the political to encompass the working of social, political, and economic institutions that create gendered, raced and classed hierarchies. The feminist slogan "the personal is the political" reflects the feminist analysis of power as operating in seemingly "private" or informal contexts as well as in public and formal proceedings (Enloe, 1983). It operates through norms and social identities, through bodies, and not just through explicit efforts to influence power (Khagram et al., 2002; Cochrane, 1999; Locher and Prügl, 2001). Power works through- and can be resisted -not just at the ballot box, but also inside patriarchal institutions such as the church, military, and family (Katzenstein, 1990; 1998; Okin, 1989).[1]

These institutional structures combine to create a "matrix of domination" (Collins, 1990). Oppression names the condition in which a social group, like women, is confined by a cage-like constellation of norms, laws and social practices (Frye, 1983; Young, [1990] 2011). Feminists identified gender as a form of oppression early on, but oppression may take many forms, characterizing, for example, distinct aspects of racial or class injustice; Oppression is multifaceted, multidimensional and intersectional (Crenshaw, 1989; Young, [1990] 2011).

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[1] This section draws on Weldon (2017) in Sawer ed. *Gendered Innovation*.

Conversely, feminist struggles against injustice are inspired by the “anti-oppression” principle, which commits activists to opposing oppression in all its forms (hooks, 2000).

This does not mean that these structures and relationships of power cannot be changed. They can: Through collective action. Just as individual actions cumulate into broad societal patterns that constitute institutions and norms, people organize together to challenge or subvert these broader institutions and norms by refusing to comply, by proposing alternative, rival norms and rules to follow (Enloe, 1996; Weldon, 2019). When people *en masse* refuse to follow the rules, the laws and norms lose- or at least begin to lose- their purchase. For example, when women telephone operators in Boston held a strike against their bifurcated workday they were able to effectively disrupt communications throughout the region leading to an increased valuation of their labor (Deutsch, 2000). Such organized action reflects empowerment, namely “the development of a sense of collective influence over the social conditions of one's life. … includes both personal empowerment and collective empowerment and suggests that the latter is a condition of the former” (Young, 1997).

Such collective action is complicated by the ways that axes of social domination intersect each other, making the concept of *intersectionality* very important for understanding not only the operation of power but also the strategies of resistance and struggles for change (Ackerly and True, 2008; Crenshaw, 1989). For example, women’s movements in the United States have had to confront relations of racial domination among women (hooks, 2000; Roth, 2004), and the civil rights movement in the United States, a movement for racial justice, was riven by class and gender as well as race (Simien, 2011). Feminists of colour writing in political science have insisted on the centrality of power to ideas of intersectionality, and vice versa (Alexander-Floyd, 2012; Bilge, 2013). Although solidarity among oppressed groups is critical to change, to their power and empowerment, it remains difficult to achieve (Rai, 2018; Einwohner et al., 2019). Feminist organizations and practices of governance grow out of these struggles for justice (see chapter 2.1), and feminist organizational principles reflect this origin.

Embodied knowledge: A phenomenological approach to politics and governance

This feminist notion of power not only expands the spheres of the political, it also grounds political analysis (and knowledge) in the experiences and bodies of women (De Beauvoir, 1972; Young, 2005). Women's bodies and experiences are shaped, enabled and constrained, by racialized, class-based norms of what is appropriately feminine, from dress to the movement of women's bodies (Young, 2005 McMillam Cottom, 2019). These messages encourage women and girls to be their bodies' own disciplinarians, to control their bodies through diet, exercise, dress and the like in order to ensure that their bodies are not unruly, uncontrolled symbols of desire (Bordo, 2004; Gay, 2017; 2018).

This policing of bodies shapes the political sphere. Powerful bodies are expected to conform to particular standards of masculinity, and national, racial and/or ethnic identity (Rai, 2014). For example, Indian parliamentarians are expected to perform a particular form of Indian national identity through clothing and speech while within the walls of parliament (Rai, 2014). Likewise, French Housing Minister Cécile Duflot was cat-called when she dared to give a speech to the National Assembly in a feminine floral dress. Women's bodies are disciplined in order to gain access to political power. These boundaries are often maintained through violence as the burgeoning research on violence against women in politics shows (Krook, 2017) .

Despite the regulation of women's bodies activists have found ways to bend and use these expectations to build power and create change. Most obviously, feminist activists have used nakedness as a political tactic to attract attention (as when FEMEN protesters used toplessness to protest violence against women in France, or in the protest-tactic in the oil-rich parts of Nigeria to protest kidnapping, occupation by troops or other problematic government actions or policies), or writing on their bodies to protest abortion regulations (as in the Netherlands). More subtly, feminist activists from the Suffragettes to the Women's March have used embodied protest as an avenue to disrupt taken-for-granted assumptions about who is and can be a political actor by actively claiming public space: By physically and collectively occupying public space--a space from which women's bodies ought to be exclude-- women use collective action to challenge gender norms and assert legitimacy as political actors (Parkins, 2000; Kelly-

Thompson, 2020). Unruly bodies have radical potential when they break from gendered expectations (Butler, 1993; Parkins, 2000).

Valuing women's embodied experiences forms the basis for both feminist epistemology and political organizing. For example, the influential (but now less frequently invoked) model of consciousness-raising is a technique for developing political analysis based on personal experiences most prominently used by feminists in the 1970s (Morgan, [1984] 2016). The method involves personal testimony that describes one's feelings and experiences in a shared and supportive context. These shared experiences are discussed in terms of their connection to broader patterns of both power and privilege as a method for building collective feminist knowledge (Sarachild, 1975; Morgan, [1984] 2016).

As the Combahee River Collective ([1977] 1995) expresses it:

"The most general statement of our politics … would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives. As Black women we see Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of colour face."

While the roots of consciousness-raising are often located in the so-called second wave and seen as a model used mainly in the past, contemporary movements such as Ni Una Menos and #metoo encourage a contemporary form of consciousness-raising using both online and in-person organizing to create shared knowledge around women's experiences with femicide and violence (Friedman and Tabbush 2016; Friedman and Rodriguez Gusta 2020). This form of knowledge production centers women's lived experiences as a basis for a better understanding of power dynamics.

Using deliberation and collective action that links personal experience to political action is central to the idea of empowerment that informs feminist approaches to governance. For

feminists, empowerment is linked to collective action whereby individual actions cumulate to constitute a challenge to power, a disruption to business as usual. Effective challenges to structures of power will be collective, working at a macro level, rather than individual, even if these macro strategies work through the transformation of a multitude of individual actions (Enloe 1996; Young 1997). These challenges to power are a collective phenomenon, requiring collective action on a wide array of dimensions to counter oppression and domination. Empowerment encompasses both the individual-level dimensions of increased agency and political awareness and the broader efforts to secure the societal conditions that make individual agency possible and meaningful. As Young puts it, “empowerment refers to the development of a sense of collective influence over the social conditions of one’s life. … includes both personal empowerment and collective empowerment and suggests that the latter is a condition of the former” (Young, 1997; see also Lloyd, 2013 Mansbridge, 2001 Weldon, 2019).

The smooth operation of bureaucratic, social, political and economic systems depends on women’s compliance (Enloe, 1996). If they organize, women can use their collective power in these realms to make a difference. The connective tissue of such collective efforts can inhere in social networks that may not appear to be oriented towards the state- towards social, economic, cultural and community activities (Weldon, 2004), again pointing to the importance of a broad understanding of what constitutes “political” activity. Organizational principles may challenge norms of governance that are implicit or taken for granted or thought of as private and personal and beyond the organizational purview, issues of time, relations or responsibilities for care work, or even how one wears one’s hair or other aspects of appearance (Brown and…: Chapter 2.1).

This embodied understanding of knowledge and power also grounds a politics of presence, the idea that women must be present to represent themselves, a principled commitment to *descriptive representation*. This politics of presence, however, stands in some tension with the feminist commitment to acknowledging women’s diversity, especially when that diversity is the basis for relations of oppression or domination among women. How can the presence of a

white, middle class woman, for example, speaking from her own experience, help to represent or understand relations of racial or class domination? How can women from the global North speak, on the basis of their own experience, for all women globally? Below we describe the ways that feminist organizing has taken up these challenges and tensions.

Universalism, Global feminism and Transnational feminism: Post-colonial Perspectives

At the same time that feminists were developing accounts of knowledge and power that linked them so closely to women's bodies and experiences- grounding them in local contexts and personal experiences- cross-national, global connections between feminists grew in intensity and frequency (Friedman, 2016; Paxton and Hughes, 2007), and the influence of these networks grew in the late 1980s and 1990s (Friedman, 1999). Global feminism emphasized the universality of women's position on the bottom of the sex hierarchy (Morgan, [1984] 2016; MacKinnon, 1989). It emphasized the ubiquity of violence against women, exclusion from political office and a lack of reproductive freedom as universally shared elements of women's global oppression (Morgan, [1984] 2016; Bunch, 1990).

The particularism and localism that is grounded in feminist phenomenology might seem to stand in tension with feminist impulses towards universalism, with movement identities that emphasize *women as women*, and global feminism. Indeed, just as these universalist ideas about women's human rights were finding expression in powerful human rights instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), feminist activists and scholars began identifying sources of gender trouble, showing the ways that the experiences of women of colour, LGBTQ people, indigenous women and differently-abled women (among others) did not conform to a single shared experience (Butler, 1993; Crenshaw, 1989; Wendell, 1996). These observations went beyond the idea that the gender binary failed to capture the experiences of the vast majority of women and men– the issue was not just difference. It was also about power relations among women: Women had divergent and even conflicting interests as women.

Some challenges to the universalizing impulses of feminist theory came from feminists writing from the standpoint of the global south, who pointed out the persistence of the global domination of former imperial powers, and the ways that contemporary feminist theory unwittingly reproduced a colonial stance with respect to Third World Women (Narayan, 1998; Mohanty, 2003). Scholars of feminism in the global South documented the long history of women's organizing for national independence and women's rights (Jayawardena, [1987] 2016). Southern women did not need Northern feminists to "save brown women from brown men" (Spivak, 1988). Contemporary feminist theorists link gender justice to a broader process of decolonization, including the decolonization of feminist theory and practice (Deer, 2015; Mohanty, 2003).

Global feminism continues to influence feminist politics – for example, in its influence on the women's rights machinery of the United Nations (Walby, 1999)– but most feminist theorists and activists have moved away from the idea of global feminism towards an idea of *transnational feminism* (Adams and Thomas, 2010; Moghadam, 2005). Many feminists in the global south have organized regional or cross-regional meetings, such as the *encuentros* in Latin America, Women Living Under Muslin Law (WLUML) in the MENA region, and Development Alternatives for a New Era (DAWN) (Adams, 2006; Moghadam, 2005). This model of feminist practice aims to forge a more limited, practical solidarity. At the 3rd World Conference on Women at Nairobi in 1985, feminist activists began to develop a model for transnational feminist collaboration that emphasized inclusivity and political pragmatism as the bases for feminist organizing: Feminists aimed to put intersectionally-marginalized women at the center of the leadership and agenda, working in coalitions on a case-by-case basis to find areas of shared commitment rather than assuming these flowed naturally from a shared identity (Weldon, 2006).

The commitment to specifically transnational rather than national feminisms signals a move beyond interests rooted in the nation-state system, with all its colonial baggage (Lu, 2017; Moghadam, 2005). Indeed, the very idea of activism as "border-crossing," as challenging national divisions animates much contemporary feminist practice. For example, a caravan of

feminist activists from several East African countries came together in a united trip to Killamanjaro to highlight land rights issues in the region: The border crossing was a deliberate effort to draw attention to these issues that transcended the specific location in which they occurred. Similarly, in El Paso, feminist activists braided hair together across the U.S.- Mexico border to symbolize cross-border solidarity (Kelly-Thompson et al., 2020). These ideas have developed into a model of transversal, intersectional solidarity, that informs feminist organizing (Hancock, 2016; Yuval-Davis, 2006). We now turn to these models below.

Intersectional solidarity

Feminist organizing has come to see intersectional solidarity as a way of building political powerful coalitions whilst simultaneously addressing the ways that difference overlaps with domination, so that axes of global, racial and sexual difference define groups of women with distinct and even conflicting interests as women. But what does intersectional solidarity mean in terms of political practice?

Intersectionality is the idea that societal axes of oppression cross-cut and intertwine in complex ways defining distinct lived experiences and perspectives, focusing initially on how race, ethnicity and gender combined to oppress black women. Intersectionality emerged as a political project in both academic and activist spaces, seeking to challenge the suppression and erasure of Black and Mestiza theorizing and praxis in intellectual and social movement spaces (Combahee River Collective, [1977] 1995). Early proponents of intersectionality developed the concept to locate policy silences and neglect of groups at the intersection of interlocking systems of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989), especially Black women in the United States. (For more on intersectionality see Chapters X and X).

Activists and policy makers all over the world have taken up the concept of intersectionality, and many activists have used the concept to inform their approach to organizing social movements Chan-Tiberghien, 2004; Falcón, 2016; Symington, 2004; Yuval-Davis, 2006: 194), However, social

movements scholars have been slower to take up the concept (Irvine et al., 2019; Liu, 2017). [2]The emerging literature on intersectionality still decenters Black and Mestiza feminism and lived experiences (Beaman and Brown, 2019) and overlooks the intellectual labor of Black intellectuals (Alexander-Floyd, 2018).

Activists who seek to take an intersectional approach to organizing have looked at various forms of coalition building and solidarity more generally as an organizational expression of a commitment to gender justice (Cho et al., 2013; Collins and Chepp, 2013). Intersectional solidarity is an "ongoing process of creating ties and coalitions across social group differences by negotiating power asymmetries" (Tormos, 2017). It resists exclusionary solidarity (Ferree and Roth, 1998) and avoid s essentialist, biological, static, and additive notions of identity (Hancock, 2007).

Movements can develop an intersectional consciousness to inform their praxis. Intersectional consciousness refers to an awareness of the dynamic interactions between social structures and their government of social group power relations (Tormos-Aponte and Ferrer-Núñez, n.d.). This consciousness can emerge at the individual and collective level (Cole, 2008; Curtin et al., 2015; Greenwood, 2008; Irvine et al., 2019; Tormos-Aponte, 2019). This consciousness can inform intersectional praxis, which refers to "organizing approaches that movements adopt to negotiate inter-group power asymmetries and steps that movements and organizers take to transform intersectional forms of oppression" (Tormos-Aponte, 2019; Tormos-Aponte and Ferrer-Núñez, n.d.).

Working to counter power in organizing means advancing critical diversity, diversity defined as emphasizing social difference when doing so works to reveal the domination of some groups in discussion, politics, and so on- a kind of analytic affirmative action, or affirmative

[2] Increasingly, scholars are interested in examining the ways in which movements enact intersectional solidarity (Montoya and Galvez Seminario 2020; Tormos-Aponte 2019; Tormos-Aponte and Ferrer-Núñez n.d.). Intersectional solidarity is a movement aspiration that stems from a synthesis between intersectional theory and praxis (Montoya and Galvez Seminario 2020; Tormos-Aponte and Ferrer-Núñez n.d.).

representation as a principle of organizing (Einwohner et al., 2019; Strolovitch, 2004). Specific practices include ensuring representation of marginalized groups in leadership, foregrounding symbols and discourse of marginalized groups in movement materials, and giving extra weight to issues raised by marginalized groups in discussions. These principles of organization reflect an understanding of *political intersectionality* as undergirding solidarity along gender lines, an understanding of gender groups as context-specific coalitions, not essential identities (Crenshaw, 1989; Young, 2005).

Social movements can adopt a series of measures to enact an intersectional approach to building solidarity. First, they can ensure that they recognize the importance and presence of intersectionally marginalized groups in their **symbols and discourse**. Second, they can ensure that intersectionally marginalized social groups are present- **descriptively represented**- in movement leadership and other movement defining deliberations (Tormos-Aponte, 2019; Weldon, 2006). Third, they can prioritize the issues of intersectionally marginalized groups in movement agendas, a technique of **affirmative representation** (Strolovitch, 2007) .

Movements vary in the specific identity categories they use or emphasize as they organize to enact intersectionality (Luna, 2019; Townsend-Bell, 2011; Tormos Aponte and Ferre-Nunez, n.d.). For instance, Townsend-Bell (2011) describes how the relative salience of different identity categories varies across geographies and organizing contexts. Further, movement deliberations may shape the relevance of certain identity categories over others. These contextual social group dynamics and activist deliberations about identity inform movement agendas, structures, discourses, and strategies.

Autonomy as a principle of feminist organizing

These models of feminist organizing implicitly rely on the ability of different groups of women to organize and articulate their distinctive viewpoints. In practice, progressive organizations of all types use caucuses and other forms of autonomous organizing for marginalized groups to facilitate the articulation of particular viewpoints. This practice flows not only from the

consciousness-raising model of feminist mobilization, but also from the recognition that power can subvert movement discussions in the absence of spaces dedicated to the expression of subaltern voices.

For this reason, feminist organizing has long emphasized the importance of autonomy (Hassim, 2009; Molyneux, 1998; Ray and Korteweg, 1999; Tripp, 2001; Weldon, 2002; 2011). Autonomous women's communities, counter-publics, have always played an important role for feminism, and shaped the relationship to state (and governance). The concept, however, has sometimes been confused with the Marxist debates about autonomy from the state. Autonomy of feminist movements has been taken to be more than this, to reflect autonomy from male dominated organizations, not just the state (Molyneux, 1998; Weldon, 2002; 2011). Organizational autonomy is necessary to allow the articulation of a distinctive feminist agenda. Initially, this insistence was related to an analysis of gender as having primacy or being the primary axis of oppression, but this has given way to an acknowledgement that gender is a multi-dimensional phenomenon, and that gender oppression cannot be disentangled from race, class and sexual identity (Townsend-Bell, 2012; Weldon, 2006). Organizational autonomy, for example, proved important for the development of lesbian and queer feminisms in Latin America as they sought to articulate their perspectives in the context of the feminist Encuentros, the regional meetings of feminist activists that have been organized since the 1980s (Alvarez et al., 2002). The insistence on organizational autonomy as a mechanism for countering the influence of power on deliberation, however, has continued to guide feminist organizing practice and models of governance.

Conclusion: empowering governance, resisting governmentality

If governance is defined as the way that collectives manage their common affairs, as "a continuing process through which conflicting or diverse interests may be accommodated and cooperative action may be taken," ("Our Global Neighborhood, cited in Keping 2018), then, feminist theory and practice emphasize some model practices for inclusive governance aimed at strengthening solidarity, even if actual feminists typically fall short of these ideals in practice. Governance includes both formal and informal rules and arrangements (for more on feminist

models of governance see chapter 2.1). Feminist principles of governance include organizational rules:

1) Inclusion of gender as a (not the) primary axis of political organizing and analysis; an organization that pays no attention to gender justice cannot be said to be feminist
2) Attention to difference/multidimensional nature of gender
3) Broad definition of political including appearance
4) An organizational structure (for example, caucuses) that facilitates and enables separate organizing and expression of distinctive points of view of marginalized gender groups (e.g. women of colour, LGBTQ_+ people, poor women) and even subgroups within those groups (poor women of colour; LGBTQ+ people of colour).
5) An organizational structure that privileges the issues and perspectives generated by caucuses or other organizational mechanisms dedicated to developing subaltern perspectives
6) An organizational structure that formalizes processes of articulating dissent
7) Descriptive representation for marginalized groups (including women, people of colour, diverse sexual identities and orientations, people of various nationalities or no nationality, etc), especially in leadership, ideally in highly visible and powerful positions
8) Attention to the power of symbols and representation in official discourse, ensuring that these represent marginalized groups
9) Efforts to form coalitions with like-minded groups to further social, political and economic transformations.
10) Political organizing that confounds and disrupts oppressive institutional practices, from borders to market imperatives.

These principles reflect a feminist understanding of empowerment, one that stands in opposition to ideas of neo-liberal governmentality, that is, an idea of empowerment of “investing in oneself” that ultimately emphasizes self-regulation in conformity with the values of market hegemony. By emphasizing collective-action and working against oppression and

domination in all its forms, feminist activists offer a model of governance that resists such governmentality.

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