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"Benign" Bigotry

The Pitfalls of Ally Performance:

Why Coalition Work Is More Effective Than Ally Theater

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Ally activism can be an important and inspiring starting point in the early stages of social justice work for activists first grappling with their privileges. An *ally* is often defined as someone from a dominant group who is working on efforts to dismantle the form of privilege their group receives. Examples include white people supporting Black Lives Matter, straight and cisgender folk supporting LGBTQ rights, men condemning rape culture. Obviously, allies are better than oppressors, and ally hearts generally are in the right place. However, a problematic type of ally performance has insinuated itself into present-day activist discourse, especially on social media. Claiming “ally” as an *identity* can limit and stifle the potential for lasting change because it centers the privileged individual, renders identity unidimensional, and shifts attention from a sustained political movement to the individual activist’s identity. In contrast, actively participating in a movement in which groups work in *coalition across differences* can be a powerful means of changing society over the long term. In what follows, we identify four pitfalls of ally activism and conclude with an overview of the theory and practice of coalition work as an alternative model.

First, if “ally” is merely an identity marker, it becomes a description of who you *are*, rather than what you *do*. That’s a problem because when it comes to social change, the work you do with others as part of a movement is more

important than who you think you are. If your social justice profile crumbles when you cannot use the term “ally,” then you might be stuck in the ally identity, and that identity by itself has no substance. If you cannot work without that label, then maybe you are not really doing any useful work.

Second, wearing “ally” as an identity can easily slip into a performance. Princess Harmony Rodriguez refers to this dynamic as “[Ally Theater](#),” part of what Indigenous Action Media calls the “[Ally Industrial Complex](#).” The concern here is about activists who focus on performing an identity for an audience of disadvantaged folk rather than doing the hard and often unseen work of social change. To get out of the surface-level ally theater loop, white people need to challenge other whites about racism—even when no one else is watching. Straight and cis people need to confront other straight and cis people on their assumptions about gender and sexuality—even when no one else is watching. Challenging people in your own identity group is one of the most important and difficult tasks of allies. You must be willing to do the work even when the work is invisible.

A third problem with “ally” arises when activists get divided into dominant-group do-gooders and subordinate-group people-who-need-help. This framework reduces complicated relationships and social positions to a simplistic and static binary. In fact, we all carry multiple identities as we navigate the world and our activism. Most of us are simultaneously in some privileged and some targeted positions—you might be a cis woman of color or a white man with a physical disability. The binary construction of *ally* and *other* can slide into the implication that the work of well-meaning people in the dominant group is uniquely valuable to the helpless activists in the targeted group. As Benjamin Dixon says, allies aren’t heroes, they’re sidekicks.

Finally, the use of the term “ally” has shifted over time from a descriptor other activists might use about you to something more self-serving and narcissistic, something you call yourself: “As an ally, I” Declaring yourself an ally distinguishes you from other people in your own group (“I’m white, but I’m one of the good ones”) and also sets you apart from the activists you are attempting to work with. Declaring yourself an ally centers your dominant and privileged status and, unintentionally, can become an *othering* gesture. For instance, some straight people exhibit their support for the queer community with “Straight but not narrow” t-shirts and buttons. On the one hand, we can appreciate the sentiment of support offered by such a gesture, especially when straight support of queer people involves risk. On the other hand, the

straight-but-not-narrow frame also declares, *I'm* not one of *them*, but I support them. Such self-labeling allows you to showcase your support of a group targeted for violence while simultaneously keeping yourself separate and away from peril.

We propose an alternative framing of social justice work that de-centers “ally” and instead brings into focus more complexity, more action, and less posing. Instead of ally-as-identity or ally-as-performance, we would like to shift the focus to a more productive way of understanding the role of activists who work across differences: *coalition work*.

Coalition work focuses less on individual identity and more on the work that different groups engage in to struggle collectively for social change. Whereas you can call yourself an ally alone in a room (or retweeting yourself on Twitter), you do coalition work only by engaging with people different from yourself. And such work is inherently challenging and risky. As Bernice Johnson Reagon says, “Most of the time you feel threatened to the core and if you don’t, you’re not really doing no coalescing.”¹

Rather than simplistically binary, coalition work is inherently intersectional. Unlike *ally*, *coalition* makes visible complex (and fraught) organizing and movement building among activists in different social positions. The 1% at the top of the power structure does well when the bottom 99% fractures and fails to form progressive alliances. We can chart different historical moments when coalition work among marginalized groups panicked the ruling elite, who then furiously deployed divisive tactics to keep those groups fragmented along various lines (particularly racial). For instance, Blacks and landless whites came together in Bacon’s Rebellion in 1676, an early coalition that so alarmed the governing elite that they responded with everything from state violence to new laws to keep Blacks and poor whites in separate subordinate places.² And we can chart moments when marginalized groups forged ways to create coalitions instead of falling into the horizontal hostility that serves the elite, as when Filipino and Mexican farmworkers built alliances in the historic [Delano grape strike](#) (1965–1970) that led to the formation of the United Farm Workers.

Today, activists have the opportunity to form productive and dynamic coalitions around issues such as better schools, a living wage, immigration rights, ending racialized violence, and ending sexualized violence. Here are some examples of coalition work on such issues:

- In 2012, the Chicago Teachers Union went on strike for better wages and benefits, while also protesting against racist policies in the school district. The union is largely white and the students are largely African American and Latinx but [commentators noted](#) that “[b]y highlighting the fact that its members’ fight for ‘good teaching conditions’ was intertwined with the fight against segregated schooling, racist probationary policies, poverty and the criminalization of students, the union showed in practice how the politics of solidarity and the recognition of shared interests can contribute to a powerful struggle.” Parents of color overwhelmingly supported the teachers.
- In 2017, the Movement for Black Lives (a coalition of groups fighting to end violence against Black communities) and Fight for \$15 (a movement to raise the federal minimum wage to \$15 per hour) initiated their [first joint national action](#) and organized protests for racial and economic justice in two dozen cities.
- While labor unions have often been pitted against immigrants (in another example of horizontal hostility that serves the ruling elite), key unions representing 4 million workers have joined together as [Working Families United](#) to support permanent protections for recipients of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) program. The TPS program (rescinded by the Trump administration) offered thousands of immigrants from El Salvador, Haiti, Nicaragua, Sudan, and Honduras authorization to work and protection from deportation.
- Recent attention to the ongoing movement to end sexualized violence also has revealed dynamic coalitions. Civil rights activist Tarana Burke launched “Me Too” in 2006 as a grassroots movement to support survivors of sexualized violence, particularly young women of color. A decade later, #MeToo rose to international prominence as women in Hollywood protested sexual harassment. In 2017, Alianza Nacional de Campesinas (representing 700,000 Latina farmworkers) issued an open statement of solidarity with the Hollywood women, prompting the formation of “Time’s Up” as a movement and legal defense fund to support workers across the labor spectrum as they fight harassment. In 2018, farmworker activists Lupe Gonzalo, Nely Rodriguez, Silvia Perez, and Julia de la Cruz (all from the Coalition of Immokalee Workers) published an [open letter](#) to Time’s Up, calling for specific acts of solidarity toward concrete solutions, including the expansion of the Fair Food Program, a worker-driven monitoring program that

seeks to eliminate human rights violations “from rape to modern-day slavery.”

Coalition work demands more from an activist than does being an ally (see the table below). The hope of being called an ally is not why you do the work. You engage in activism because, independent of your label, it’s important work. Coalition work is an active process, not a passive identity, nor a feel-good performance for status points. Whereas ally theater is often both a starting point and an end point, coalition work is continuous, and it is hard work. “Some people will come to a coalition and they rate the success of the coalition on whether or not they feel good when they get there,” says Bernice Johnson Reagon. “They’re not looking for a coalition; they’re looking for a home! They’re looking for a bottle with some milk in it and a nipple, which does not happen in a coalition.”³

Coalition work recognizes that fighting oppression binds us together and that it’s the ruling elite who benefit when we fail to forge alliances for social change. Coalition work is also risky. We’ll make mistakes. But working for liberation requires courage.

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