

Trinity College

## Trinity College Digital Repository

---

The Trinity Papers (2011 - present)

Trinity Publications (Newspapers, Yearbooks,  
Catalogs, etc.)

---

2019

### Analyzing the Combahee River Collective as a Social Movement

Alexander Gnassi

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/trinitypapers>



Part of the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Gnassi, Alexander, "Analyzing the Combahee River Collective as a Social Movement". *The Trinity Papers (2011 - present) (2019)*.

Trinity College Digital Repository, Hartford, CT. <https://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/trinitypapers/74>

# Analyzing the Combahee River Collective as a Social Movement

---

Alexander Gnassi

Sociological analysis of social movements has progressed dialectically, each new theory building off and in contrast to what previously existed, whilst what previously existed is modified as newer theories bring up relevant new ideas. Three theories—Collective Behavior Theory (CB), Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT), and Political Process Theory (PPT)—best illustrate this dialectical relationship through their many commonalities and clear departures from one another (Edwards 2017). Across the theories, four general elements of social movements are proffered: social movements are collective organized efforts at social change, they are durable over a period of time and engage with a powerful opponent on a conflictual issue, members of a social movement share a collective identity, and social movements utilize protest as a mechanism to achieve their goals (Edwards 2017). All three theories identify social problems as a necessary element, though not a causal factor, of collective action, protest, and social movements. In general, contemporary conceptualizations of social movements are moving toward “a ‘rational’ understanding of what social movements are and how they operate” (Edwards 2017:8). This has not always been the case.

The first prevalent theory, CB, arose in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as a response to the rise of anti-democratic (often fascist) movements. Two significant contributions made by CB are the group construction and negotiation of a shared explanation of their position and causes of grievances as a requisite step in collective action, and the importance of emotion in collective action (Edwards 2017). However, CB’s analysis of social movements preoccupies itself to a fault with the emotional irrationality of actors, circular reactions taking place in mobs, and the role of agitators in disrupting social order. This intimates that social movements are not productive because they are disruptive to social order and cause people to act irrationally and emotionally.

Juxtaposing CB, RMT emphasizes rational actors (based in Rational Action Theory) making cost-benefit driven decisions for participation in collective action and the importance of resources in mobilization efforts of social movements. RMT’s defenestration of emotion from explanations of collective action is in reaction to CB. Though helpful in some modes of analysis, RMT’s failure to address CB’s emotional arguments creates significant holes in RMT. RMT, like CB, emphasizes the need for common understanding of grievances as one important, though not causal, factor in mobilization of collective action (Edwards 2017). RMT’s focus on rational actors gives prominence to the free rider problem – people who are able to accrue the benefits of collective action without incurring the costs of participation. Additionally, RMT’s framework provides a bureaucratic structure of social movements, Social Movements (SMs), Social Movement Organizations (SMOs), Social Movement Industries (SMIs), and Social Movement Sectors (SMSs). This rigid bureaucratic framework almost draws parallels between the activity of social movement organizations (and their actors) with capitalist businesses and the interactions between large-scale bureaucratic structures in capitalist societies. This is problematic because many social movements focus on dismantling capitalism through actions aimed to act outside of the capitalist system.

PPT focuses on the political and social environment in which a social movement comes into being for explanations of collective action. PPT emphasizes the political structures and the impact of their closed or open nature to generate favorable or unfavorable political climates and opportunities. Often unfavorable political climates for social movements can actually be political opportunities, making the favorability of the climate not a single causal explanation for the success of a social movement. Shifts in alignments between political elites, changes in policy, and large societal changes create political opportunities that social movements can capitalize on to pursue their agendas

(Edwards 2017). PPT has shortcomings in its ability to conceptualize social movements that take place on a global scale across several political climates, as well as its limited focus on political opportunities when the world around a movement is also “a world of ‘cultural opportunity’, ‘media opportunity’, ‘socio-economic opportunity’, and ‘discursive opportunity’” (Edwards 2017:90).

In 1974 Barbra Smith, Beverly Smith, and Demita Frazier founded the Combahee River Collective (CRC) as a radical queer Black feminist organization with the goal of combating the omnipresence of capitalist heterosexist patriarchal white supremacy in society through establishing a socialist agenda that articulates the primacy of the unique oppression faced by Black women. Within the laws of the United States, as well as within Black liberation and feminist organizations, there was no language to conceptualize the unique interlocking oppressions of sexism and racism faced by Black women. Dissecting the legal case *Moore v Hughes Helicopter*, Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) in her critique of antidiscrimination law exemplifies dysgraphia in the orthography of the law when addressing Black women; Black and female not being seen together in law. It is an instance of the acute impact of anagrammatical blackness—the way in which ‘common knowledge’ societal constructions of blackness do not allow for Black people to be defined or spoken about in the same way as others—forcing Black women fighting interlocking oppressions in court to pick between one oppressed identity, Black or women, but not both (Crenshaw 1989, Sharpe 2016, Taylor 2017). This immobilizing leitmotiv, forced to pick between fighting against oppression of white women or Black men, is also present in the literature of some Black liberation movements and in the discourse utilized by white feminists when addressing Black queer women at conferences (Taylor 2017). The CRC’s analysis was not limited to the equality of women with men nor with separatism. It is an analysis critical of capitalism that extends Marxist analysis to incorporate the specific oppression of Black women. Initially using consciousness raising groups at the Cambridge Women’s Center (Springer 2001), the CRC developed the Combahee River Collective Statement in which they assert that “if Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression” (Taylor 2017:23). The CRC utilized many tactics such as publishing Black feminist thought in opposition to and protest of many Black liberation and radical feminist groups, mobilizing Third World feminist organizations around the killing of Black women, and campaigning with other organizations around issues of sterilization, abortion rights, and domestic violence (Smith 1985, Taylor 2017).

The CRC unquestionably meets all four criteria of a social movement. They are a collective group of people organized around a specific set of goals laid out in the CRC Statement and methods of reaching those goals (Taylor 2017). They engage with ideas over a sustained period of time, fighting against capitalism and heterosexist patriarchal white supremacist organizations and structures. They look at the unique interlocking oppressions faced by Black women as experiences that have yet to be given a voice, and build upon this to identify structural problems with both state-run institutions and within other social movements that fail to address the needs of Black women. Additionally, they share a collective identity as a socialist, antisexist, antiracist organization. The CRC offers a broad definition of feminism, showing the importance of liberation of all women, especially Black women as necessary, thus claiming a feminist identity. The CRC utilized publication as a method of protest. The CRC Statement of 1977 challenges the definitions of feminism and antiracism presented by radical feminism and by Black liberation movements and openly critiques their approaches to achieving their goals (Taylor 2017). Through this challenge the CRC protested against the silencing of Black women by bringing the issue to the fore, making it unavoidable. Though after the end of the CRC, additional academically published writings such as Audre Lorde’s “Uses of Anger” and Barbra Smith’s “Some Home Truths in the Contemporary Black Feminist Movement” continued the tradition of publication as protest. Smith challenges myths perpetuated by the state, mass media, and other social movement organizations about Black women and the

## 2 Alexander Gnassi

struggles they face, despite calls for Black women to be quiet and wait their turn (Smith 1985). Lorde directly addresses the oppressive discourse of anyone, including radical feminists and Black men, who legitimize dismissing the value of Black women's perspectives based on the tone in which Black women talk about their experiences (Lorde 1997). These documents are protesting what Paulo Freire calls the theme of silence—a state in which oppressed people are so powerless where it is forbidden to even mention the injustices that are being committed—that is present in other social movements at the time (Freire 2000). Visible publication in academic journals is a mechanism of protest against dominant discourses present in these specific organizations and in society on a larger scale.

Viewing the CRC through the lens of CB theorist Herbert Blumer, the success of the movement is explained by three factors. First, the use of consciousness raising groups to construct a shared definition of grievances arising from marginalization by other social movements as well as deprivation of legal redress due to the dysgraphia in the orthography of the law when it comes to interlocking oppressions faced by Black women. Second, the use of publication as a method of agitation. The CRC's ability to influence the discourse of, and build solidarity with, antiracist and antisexist movements emanated from their publications' ability to change people's way of perceiving their own causes. It forced others to question established mechanisms for enacting change. Finally, Blumer would attribute the CRC's success to the immense fervor that is present in their writings and speeches. Their emotions facilitated the formation of emotional connections with others, which is key because "involvement with a cause can come at a great personal cost...in time, energy money, freedom or even life" (Edwards 2017:26). Blumer might say a weakness of the movement lies with its small numbers and not using direct action as a protest tactic. Direct action brings together a crowd and physically confronts oppressors, which is more conducive to inspiring emotion and circular reactions in others than publications.

Employing an RMT analysis gives prominence to the power of Black women's perspectives, and the use of anger as intangible resources that helped the CRC succeed. Audre Lorde shows that anger "can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change" (Lorde 1997:280). The anger of Black women, stemming from the inability of existing movements to address their specific needs, was a mobilizing resource. It challenged people in other movements to see their own oppression as connected to the oppression of Black women. As such, other movements' involvement with, and incorporation of, the needs of Black women into their own movements was rational. The unique perspectives of Black women provided a bottom up approach to addressing oppressions of all people and allowed for a multiplicity of conscious constituents, people who participate in but do not directly benefit from a collective action, to see the value of participating in the actions of the CRC (Edwards 2017). The bottom up approach also legitimized CRC members supporting other organizations not directly confronting issues impacting Black women but were still fighting oppression. Thus, the CRC was able to build a strong network of mutually beneficial relationships with other SMOs, sharing resources to reduce mobilization costs. One disadvantage RMT highlights is the CRC's inability to address the free rider problem. CRC members lacked the numbers and support to reach a critical mass, and they did not employ selective incentives of social sanctions to discourage free riding.

Lastly, a PPT lens identifies the closed nature of the political climate within the existing radical feminist and Black liberation movements as an important factor driving the creation of the CRC. This closed nature actually provided a favorable political context, building solidarity with Black women who did not see adequate representation of their perspectives within the existing movements. Political opportunities in the favorable political context shifted calculations of rational actors (Black women) to see the benefits of creating their own movement outweighing the costs. The PPT perspective views the value of anger, as outlined by Lorde, in creating divisions among the

political elites within the existing organizations (Lorde 1997). Divisions among elites and realignment of elites with the perspectives of Black women are two circumstances fostering new political opportunities for the formation of the CRC (Edwards 2017). A PPT analysis does not afford an adequate examination of the importance of publication as a mechanism of protest and as such obscures important aspects of the lasting contributions the CRC made to feminism.

The lasting impacts of the CRC are manifold. CRC member Barbra Smith's definition of feminism: "political theory and practice to free all women: women of color, working-class women, as well as white economically privileged heterosexual women. Anything less than this is not feminism, but merely female self-aggrandizement" (Smith in Thompson 2002:340) is so expansive it still acts as the model today. The CRC firmly situates the experiences of Black women as unique and valuable, bringing light to the centrality of Black women's perspectives in fighting oppression. One prominent contemporary social movement that draws on the work of the CRC is Black Lives Matter (BLM). Alicia Garza, the founder of BLM, says that the "Combahee and their work was my cushion and a balm to soothe dynamics that were so troubling" (Garza in Taylor 2017:155). Lastly, the CRC began to provide necessary language to explain the experiences of Black women, creating terms such as interlocking oppressions and identity politics. This lasting contribution provided a grammar to combat legal codes and other social movement organizations unable to see that "the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism" (Crenshaw 1989:140) leading to the conclusion that any analysis of inequality that does not address the unique way that Black women are subordinated is insufficient (Crenshaw 1989). The CRC's contributions are still unfolding today in the work of many Black feminists, social movements, and analyses of inequality. Increasingly visible antiracist, antisexist, and anticapitalist social movements in contemporary society are applying intersectional frameworks to analyze the impact of social policies and institutions. Some of these movements are using the bottom up approach promulgated by the CRC to provide solutions that truly seek to free all women, and thus address oppression of all people. In a society characterized by dynamic, yet ever increasing economic and social inequality, it is necessary to learn about the circumstances that gave rise to the CRC, their modes of analysis, and the solutions they present to address the oppression of Black women and thus all people.

## Bibliography

- Crenshaw, Kimberle. 1989. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989(1):139-167.
- Edwards, Gemma. 2014. *Social Movements and Protest*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Freire, Paulo. 2000. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed: 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition*. New York, NY: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc.
- Lorde, Audre. 1997. "The Uses of Anger." *Women's Studies Quarterly* 25(1):278-285.
- Sharpe, Christina. 2016. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Smith, Barbara. 1985. "Some Home Truths on the Contemporary Black Feminist Movement" *The Black Scholar* 16(2):4-13.
- Springer, Kimberly. 2001. "The Interstitial Politics of Black Feminist Organizations." *Meridians* 1(2):155-191.
- Taylor, Keeanga-Yamahtta. 2017. *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective*. Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books.
- Thompson, Becky. 2002. "Multiracial Feminism: Recasting the Chronology of Second Wave Feminism." *Feminist Studies* 28(2):323-355.