FEMINIST BOUNDARIES IN THE FEMINIST-FRIENDLY ORGANIZATION
The Women's Caucus of ACT UP/LA

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In this article, I argue that members of the Women's Caucus (WC) of ACT UP/LA (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) formed a boundary between themselves and male members to increase the WC's power within the feminist-friendly organization. The WC's boundary-making strategies—formalizing women's space and reinscribing gender difference—combatted "slippage" of ACT UP/LA's focus away from women's issues precipitated by men's greater numbers in the group. ACT UP/LA's feminist-friendly politics, legitimated WC efforts, and caused male members to defer to the WC; the WC became "official women," gaining control over their agenda, over their participation within ACT UP/LA, and over male contributions to the WC itself. Boundary making had an unintended effect, compartmentalization, whereby women's issues became the sole responsibility of the WC. I conclude that the WC's boundary making in ACT UP/LA's feminist-friendly milieu was at once successful and problematic, and that the efforts of feminists in such organizations deserve greater scrutiny.

Women's participation in social protest movements has not been limited to organizing in autonomous, organizationally distinct feminist movements (Chafetz and Dworkin 1986; Milkman 1985; West and Blumberg 1990). When organizing alongside men, women often formed auxiliaries to, or women's caucuses within, protest organizations, and this kind of organizing by women continued when feminist options were present, as was the case during second-wave feminism. Women were also participants in the labor movement, the antinuclear movement, and in movements for national/ethnic liberation (B. Epstein 1991; Giddings 1984; Milkman 1985). Second-wave feminism as a mass political movement has waned with feminist organizations becoming more institutionalized and decentralized (Ferree and Martin 1995); forming caucuses within mixed-gender organizations continues to be an important avenue for feminist praxis.

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As Katzenstein (1990, 33) has suggested, studying “the politics of association-alism” within conservative institutions is a key part of the second-wave feminist legacy. In contrast, the legacy of second-wave feminism for the oppositional political landscape is the possibility of feminists working within mixed-gender feminist-friendly organizations. In this article, I examine how feminist women in one feminist-friendly organization used boundary-making strategies to constitute and maintain themselves as a feminist women’s caucus inside the organization itself. To examine the case of the Women’s Caucus (WC) of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP/LA), I extend Taylor and Whittier’s (1992, 111) concept of boundary making, the process by which a dominated group sets itself apart from the mainstream, to dynamics internal to ACT UP/LA. I argue that the boundary WC members drew between themselves and the rest of the ACT UP/LA had the effect of making the women more visible and powerful within the organization.

After a brief discussion of data and method, I will consider the situation of relative invisibility that WC members had as women within the largely male ACT UP/LA General Body (GB). I describe the strategies used by WC members to make and maintain boundaries between themselves and the rest of ACT UP/LA, namely, formalizing women’s space and reinscribing gender difference. Following this, I discuss the result of these strategies, that is, how the WC became ACT UP/LA’s “official women.” ACT UP/LA’s friendliness toward feminism was a tremendous advantage for WC members, who as official women were empowered to make decisions about what constituted women’s issues and how GB men should orient themselves toward those issues. Finally, I discuss the compartmentalization of women’s issues, the main problem boundary making engendered for the women. ACT UP/LA's friendliness to feminism had the unintended consequence of making the WC members, and not the GB, primarily responsible for action on women’s issues. I conclude that feminist organizing within a feminist-friendly ACT UP/LA and within the movement nationally was an accepted part of anti-AIDS protest, in that such organizing made manifest and sustained the movement’s commitments to radical, outsider politics. I further conclude that examining internal social protest gender dynamics, such as boundary making, is critical to understanding the numerical and structural challenges that feminists face in mixed-gender settings, and how these challenges are met.

METHOD AND DATA

I came to ACT UP/LA’s Women’s Caucus meetings out of political convictions and with the intention of doing an ethnographic study of the group. I had been using archival material to study social movements, and I was interested in studying political activism through engagement, influenced by works by Melucci (1989) and Touraine (1981). At the first meeting I attended, I discovered that the WC was founded in early 1990, when the members came together as a feminist group to
combat the lack of attention given to issues concerning women and AIDS in ACT UP/LA. A WC member, Carolyn, explained to me that women formed only about 10 percent of the attendees at the GB meetings, and that they “didn’t feel that they had voice” there (11/11/90 WC meeting).

I participated in the WC from November 1990 through November 1991. For this article, I have drawn from my field notes, from a large collection of ACT UP flyers, position papers, and reprints, and from the few secondary sources that exist on ACT UP itself. After the first two weeks, I had the WC’s approval for my research. I also attended several meetings of ACT UP/LA’s Treatment and Data Committee and was sent as a WC representative to the AIDS Clinical Trial Group (ACTG) meeting in Washington, DC in March 1991. In short, for one year, I did what ACT UP members did; I demonstrated, went to many meetings, voted on proposals, and attended fund-raisers to put money in WC/ACT UP/LA coffers.

I quickly discovered that the WC was truly a caucus, a bounded part of a larger whole, and so my participation in both the WC and the GB escalated accordingly. In 1990-91, 80 to 120 people attended GB meetings, which were quite entertaining. WC meetings could be fun, but they were much smaller—rarely more than 10 people—and much more intense; furthermore, all the WC members attended GB meetings as well and most members also worked on other ACT UP/LA committees. At GB meetings, different personalities from different committees would give reports, sometimes soberly, more often with a great deal of humor. Members would clap and snap their approval of actions, or hiss and boo at the appropriate villains.

**INVISIBILITY WITHIN ACT UP AND WOMEN’S CAUCUS FORMATION**

Women were not the central concern of the GB of ACT UP/LA, an overwhelmingly white male group (as was ACT UP nationally). Women’s low visibility within the GB meant that the activist agenda of its women members was subordinated, an agenda that in ACT UP/LA was different from the men’s. The empowerment strategies of WC members (several of whom self-identified as HIV-positive) were based on a recognition of the power relations that affected women seeking to control their disease in a male-dominated, class- and race-stratified world (Corea 1992; Dixon 1990; S. Epstein 1996; Schneider and Stoller 1994; Stein 1992). WC members strongly agreed with the demands of New York City ACT UP women who argued for a complete overhaul of the health care delivery system and for “a movement for social change with a feminist agenda” (see Leonard 1990, 117).

For the WC, forming a caucus within the male GB was one way of making themselves visible as women with a globally oriented approach to fighting HIV. Within ACT UP, members with this feminist, global perspective developed a more confrontational protest style and clashed with those (male) members who fought a survival-oriented and more collaborationist battle to “get drugs into bodies”
Although ACT-UP/LA avoided formal secession or splintering over these issues such as occurred in ACT-UP San Francisco (Geltmaker 1992), ACT UP/LA was not immune from tensions that divided members elsewhere, as the very formation of the WC showed.

In forming a feminist women’s caucus, WC’s members established a boundary between themselves and the GB. Taylor and Whittier (1992, 111) have pointed out how groups challenging the status quo of necessity form boundaries between themselves and the mainstream as a means of increasing their visibility on the political landscape. In boundary making, movement members “mark the social territories of group relations by highlighting differences between activists and the web of others in the contested social world”; in short, activists make the outside world see them by emphasizing their unique needs.

Boundary making as such increases the external visibility of historically dominated constituencies, which is a key goal of social movement organizing, as participants strive to make themselves known to political targets and to the public at large (Jenson 1987). Demonstrators, of course, are literally noisy and visible, framing collective grievances so that they attract maximum attention from the centers of power and the mass media (Molotch 1979; Snow and Benford 1992). As Gamson (1989) argued, many ACT UP actions were directly aimed at making demonstrators visible, therefore countering the heterosexual domination that rendered gays and HIV-positive persons invisible.

I argue that visibility can also be an internal issue for activists from historically dominated groups as they attempt to direct the agenda and energies of others in their organizations. Therefore, internal boundary making plays a key role for these internally invisible activists. Social movements have constituencies within them based on varying constellations of perceived interests (Melucci 1989), and quite often women’s interests differ considerably from the men with whom they organize. Hence, just as social movement participants form boundaries between themselves and the larger polity to make themselves seen, women in social movement organizations often can make their presence known by establishing internal boundaries (i.e., forming a caucus).

Emergent feminist women’s caucuses within social movement organizations have sometimes met with hostility from the men, who see them as a threat to organizational stability; this has been the case even in left-leaning groups with significant female participation (Cade Bambara 1970; Evans 1979; Milkman 1985). Conversely, feminism can be so integral to a social movement—so much a part of the movement’s culture—that feminist ideology and feminist process is incorporated seamlessly into the movement and adhered to actively by both women and men (see B. Epstein’s 1991 work on the antinuclear movement). If there is a continuum of possibilities for a social movement’s acceptance of feminism from hostility to complete acceptance, I propose that the WC members of ACT UP/LA worked within a feminist-friendly organization. Feminist-friendly organizations go beyond taken-for-granted incorporation of some feminist attitudes or beliefs into members’ personal consciousnesses (Rapp 1990), to a public stance of openness to
feminist identities and ideas; they close the "distance" (Stein 1992, 52) that postfeminists (Stacey 1990) take toward feminist politics.

ACT UP as an organization accepted feminist analyses of aspects of the AIDS crisis, and not in a "postfeminist," "depoliticized" manner (Stacey 1990, 348). Altman characterized ACT UP nationally as "clearly one of the organizational forums where a feminist analysis of AIDS has been able to have some impact" (1994, 72), and WC members in ACT UP/LA as feminists had the support of male participants in forming a women's caucus; it was seen as a legitimate thing to do. Yet, feminism as ideology and process was not reflected in the practical activities of the majority of male activists in the group. As a result, the WC was formed, a bounded group within an organization, to promote women's visibility within ACT UP/LA and ensure action on women's issues.

**BOUNDARY-MAKING STRATEGIES**

Male ACT UP/LA members were in theory supportive of the need to eradicate sexism, and WC members were even delegated the role of keeping ACT UP/LA feminist by "confronting sexism in the (G)eneral (B)ody" (ACT UP/LA 1991). However, without vigilance on the part of WC members, ACT UP/LA's friendliness to feminism could not by itself make women's needs more visible. Unlike women mobilizing in conservative institutional settings, WC members did not face "ideological constraints" (Katzenstein 1990, 36) to feminism but the practical problem of sheer numbers; the number of men versus women in ACT UP/LA virtually guaranteed that women's needs would be subsumed by men's.

As a consequence of their numerical disadvantage, WC members spent considerable time making sure they were not swallowed up by the concerns of GB men, men whose support was at the same time crucial to the success of WC actions and events. Men were needed to support the WC, but when men were in attendance at WC events, the focus on women and AIDS was subject to slippage. For example, 50 percent of the attendees at a WC-sponsored "Women and AIDS Teach-in" in November of 1990 were men. Two hours into the Teach-in, I noted the following:

Don speaks, asking Anna (a researcher/activist with a Southern California based project looking at heterosexual transmission in Latino couples) with regard to the undocumented women's health care, couldn't she put pressure on the Catholic church and Catholic hospitals to open up to helping Latina women . . . he is the first man to actually ask a question about women so far.

With the exception of Don and his lover, Sam—two self-identified male feminists—GB men at the Teach-in continually asked speakers about gay male issues, and WC members countered by asking questions about women and AIDS to refocus the discussion. Anna, for instance, was inundated with men's questions on, or concerns about, the sexual lives of secretly bisexual Latino husbands; the need
for the Latino community to have its own “Rock Hudson” to focus its awareness on AIDS; the possible sources of HIV infection of a local activist priest who was then ill with (and has since died from) AIDS; whether the Latino community was embarrassed by its “gay problem” and possibilities for educational campaigns on AIDS in the Latino community. Only the WC women (and Don and Sam) refocused the discussion on Latinas, its intended topic.

The loss of focus at WC events on women’s concerns was a frequent occurrence and a constant concern as long as men outnumbered women in ACT UP/LA. Therefore, WC members used boundary-making strategies—formalizing women’s space and reinscribing gender difference—to demarcate the WC from the GB and heighten their visibility within the latter.

Formalizing Women’s Space

Members of the WC formalized a separate meeting time and space for themselves, and these meetings were held apart from the GB working meetings. Within ACT UP/LA’s organizational structure the very act of forming a caucus guaranteed the women some notice. During GB meetings, committees and caucuses were allotted time to give reports, and during working GB meetings, committees and caucuses were given time to meet together.

But the first Women’s Caucus meeting I went to surprised me; men were in attendance:

There are about an even number of men and women in the room, which puzzles me, although I don’t ask about it. The men and women seem to know each other well and make jokes about who was seen with whom at what bookstore. (WC meeting, 11/11/90)

Without my asking, the anomaly of men attending a “women’s caucus” meeting was explained to me by Carolyn, who told me that “because ACT UP is planning an upcoming ‘Week of Outrage’ and major demo at the CDC [Centers for Disease Control] in Atlanta, men are here to help with getting everything together.” In fact, during the year I was involved, WC meetings were women-only meetings for roughly half the year; there would be men at meetings for the planning, execution and, “recap” of all major WC actions. In practice, the WC meetings had men in attendance more often than not, since men also attended WC working groups during GB working meetings. Men attended all WC actions and were always present in greater numbers than were women.

However, in terms of boundary making, it was the formal definition of the outside meetings as women’s space that mattered. The presence of men did not detract from the formally separate nature of WC meetings; WC members clung to the exclusive nature of the outside meeting, no matter who actually attended. Male attendance was seen by the WC as provisional, and the GB backed the WC members up in this view. ACT UP/LA’s feminist friendliness gave the WC members the right
to determine who came to meetings and when, empowering the women to invite men in or disinvite them as they saw fit.

As such, considerable meeting time was spent making decisions on when and why men could attend and participate. For example, men were involved in planning a weeklong series of WC actions in November 1990, and men participated in all these actions. After the week was over, the WC members made a decision to let men come to part of one more WC meeting to “wrap up”; after that, as one member put it, the WC would say “hasta la vista” to the “boys.”

At the first of such closed meetings of the WC that I attended, the issue of male attendance was raised; one man, Dylan, wanted to continue coming to WC meetings. The group’s response to Dylan’s request was to reiterate “policy”:

Pippa . . . thinks it may be time to “restate policy” regarding men at [WC] meetings. . . . Men may ask for permission to attend, and men can attend WC meetings at GB working meetings, every other week. Men are also invited to all actions. . . . Pippa points out, every other meeting is open to men. . . . Nora concurs, saying that she sees no reason to change, that the meetings are supposed to be women’s space, because of the “safety factor” and the “stereotypical men/women thing, with men being all aggressive.” (WC meeting, 12/23/90)

Accommodating separatist feminists was brought forward as a reason for the women’s space of the outside meetings, as was the safety of an all-women group disrupted by male aggression, two rather compelling reasons for banning men. Nevertheless, the WC women—who all liked Dylan because he worked hard and was mild mannered—urged him to make use of the formal petition process: “Nora says ‘our Sundays are for women only space. Does Dylan have a special reason [to want to attend WC meetings]?’ Milly says, ‘He can petition to attend if he has a special reason for being here.’ ” (WC meeting, 12/23/90).

WC members actually were not very fussy about the rationale for keeping WC meetings formally separate from GB men; policy was what mattered to them. By January 1991, WC members felt it necessary to restate the policy on male attendance at WC meetings for the entire GB. Male aggression was omitted from this restatement, the notion of separatist accommodation was actually contradicted, and safety was redefined:

Pippa gets up to restate the WC position on male attendance. “Men are welcome at the working meetings,” she says. “We are not separatists, as we’ve said over and over again. . . . We meet separately for privacy issues, to discuss gynecological treatment, for safety.” (GB meeting, 1/14/91)

Thus, the reasons for maintaining women’s space varied over time, but the formally exclusive nature of the separate meeting was insisted on as a means of maintaining the boundaries between ACT UP/LA and the WC. Three months after the January announcement of policy, men were formally invited back to the outside WC meetings to help plan a May 1991 series of actions for prisoner rights in Sacramento.
Reinscribing Gender Difference

Members of the WC continually reminded themselves and the GB of differences between men and women, since most GB men were not self-identified feminists; men in ACT UP/LA could not be counted on to make women's position as a historically dominated group a central part of their worldview. There were two primary ways in which gender difference was reinscribed by the WC. First, within various contexts outside WC meetings, members counted men, making themselves aware of male presence. Second, in dealing with the GB, WC members let men know there were women present so that the GB could not proceed without acknowledging them.

Counting men—noting how many men were or would be at an event—was a frequent activity at WC meetings. Whether there would be too many men at a fund-raiser could be cause for concern; the presence of men on conference calls of the national ACT UP women's treatment network was monitored. Since organizing with men was an inevitable part of being in ACT UP/LA, counting men made WC members aware on a continual basis of how visible they were to the members of ACT UP/LA's General Body.

Counting men led to attempts to control the number of men at WC events so as to maintain the focus on women and HIV; these attempts were primarily unsuccessful. One major instance that showed why WC members had such concerns was the “Dance of Death.” Pippa was concerned with how many women would be at the “Dance,” a guerilla theater event where the group, dressed as different types of everyday women, would “die” on the Venice Beach boardwalk, and distribute information about women and AIDS. “Pippa says that she doesn’t want more men [for the event]; there are a few men in drag that are going to participate, but she doesn’t want the whole group being dominated by that image” (WC meeting, 11/25/90). Trina, at the following WC meeting, recapped the “Dance of Death,” noting that there were more men than women at the event, and that there were also more than a few men in drag present. This concerned WC members; they worried that the male images would obscure the one they wished to create of ordinary women being affected by AIDS. In this sense, the “Dance of Death” was not an unqualified success, since the WC’s intentions to make women visible as part of the HIV-positive community were complicated by the presence of too many men.

The “Dance of Death” recap also pointed to a second aspect of reinscribing gender difference, that of showing others that there were women present. While the success of the “Dance of Death” was constructed by WC members to illustrate just how visible women were to the general public, WC members also felt the need to make themselves visible within the GB. The WC, individually and collectively, repeatedly reminded GB men that women were present and that women’s presence mattered.

Reminding men that there were women present was done both formally and informally. Formally, the very act of forming a caucus meant that the WC reported to the GB as a women’s caucus at every GB meeting. Countering the “we’re all gay
in this together” ethos, WC members used the reports to let GB men know about WC actions and issues, making gender differences visible. They called attention to the specifics of women’s experiences in the AIDS epidemic and further showed how women’s experience with HIV was different.

For example, the WC challenged GB men’s ignorance of the issues surrounding women and AIDS by giving formal presentations during their report time, thus breaking with committee report protocol. The WC began presenting “WET (Women’s Educational Thang) Minutes” during their reports in GB meetings in August 1991. WET minutes were intended to inform the GB of specific problems confronting HIV-infected women; in giving GB men this information, WC members communicated that the men’s knowledge of the effects of HIV disease was incomplete. In one instance, a WC member delivered a WET Minute on the gender-specific opportunistic infections suffered by HIV-positive women (e.g., pelvic inflammatory disease and refractory vaginal yeast infections) about which the GB men were presumed to be ignorant. The break with de facto committee report format—a short, strictly educational use of GB meeting time—was never challenged by any of the men, and several WET minutes were greeted with anticipatory applause by GB members.

On an informal level, WC assertions that there were women present were sometimes so subtle as to be covert, as when one WC member specifically designed ACT UP T-shirt graphics for women’s bodies instead of men’s. Rather than scattering or sitting with other committees of which they were a part, WC members tended to sit together at GB meetings, thus making a bloc of women visible to the rest of the group. WC members also on occasion overtly challenged GB members regarding their assumptions about what constituted ACT UP movement culture, as in the example below:

There are fifty or so people on the bus. People are playing with the p.a. system, making jokes about “on your flight this evening.” . . . A youngish GB member gets up, takes the mike and says in a very campy way, “Alright, everybody, let’s sing the theme song from the Brady Bunch!” Before he can start, Trina growls loudly from behind me, “Forget it! That show ruined my life.” (11/30/90)

Trina’s reaction to a 1970s’ television sitcom may not seem noteworthy, but she challenged the GB member’s idea about what the show should mean to others in ACT UP/LA. She questioned the “camp” sensibility that dominated male GB humor by pointing out that the Bradys were not the kind of cultural touchstone that everyone could share and safely mock together. Men could see the Brady Bunch as merely silly; a lesbian woman like Trina had a very different response to the show’s rigidly traditional female stereotypes (stay-at-home mom, selfless maid, blonde girl children mostly involved with worrying about their hair and whether boys liked them).

Thus, WC members reinscribed gender difference as they counted and even tried to control men in attendance at events, and as they reminded the GB men that
women were present in the ranks. Reinscribing gender differences served to reidentify the boundaries between the WC and the GB, highlighting and making visible the presence and different needs of women in ACT UP/LA.

**BECOMING OFFICIAL WOMEN: THE FRUITS OF BOUNDARY MAKING IN THE FEMINIST-FRIENDLY ORGANIZATION**

As a result of the boundary-making strategies of the WC, and as a consequence of feminist-friendly politics within ACT UP/LA, the GB treated WC members as official representatives of women’s interests in ACT UP/LA, despite the fact that not all women in ACT UP/LA came to WC meetings. Since ACT UP’s committee structure gave WC members the opportunity to be visible in front of the GB at every meeting, WC members came to be seen as representing all ACT UP women. Certain decisions and tasks were considered under WC control and WC members were accorded a certain amount of deference.

WC members, for example, decided who got to go to conferences on women and HIV, and they were supported in these decisions by almost all GB men. The WC was also able to present the GB with decisions that the WC considered final, even though proposals from other committees were often subject to GB debate:

Milly, who has just run down the list of items discussed during the women’s treatment conference call, finishes by . . . talking about the moratorium on closed door meetings with Federal officials for six months on women’s issues. She says “as a Women’s Caucus we aren’t going to meet with them, and we expect ACT UP to respect that.”

(GB meeting, 2/25/91)

GB deference allowed WC members, as official representatives of ACT UP women, to determine what women’s issues were within ACT UP/LA. There were no obvious women’s issues in ACT UP/LA; instead, there were Women’s Caucus issues. The WC chose their own agenda, and it was these choices and not those of other GB members—female or male—that guided their work. WC issues included calling attention to substandard conditions for HIV-positive women prisoners; challenging the CDC definition of AIDS to include women-specific opportunistic infections; criticizing ACTG drug protocols for women who were marred by the lack of informed consent; agitating for the enrollment of women in drug trials where inclusion criteria unfairly excluded them; and asking drug companies to have labels placed on newly over-the-counter yeast infection remedies, warning that recurrent yeast infections could be a sign of HIV infection.

As a result of the deference that GB men showed to the WC, members were able to avoid taking on a generic women’s agenda. For example, pro-choice clinic defense, a popular activity for GB members, was not a project of the WC; they were almost completely uninterested in countering Operation Rescue demonstrations. Clinic defense never appeared on the agenda at WC meetings until two ACT UP
women who did not usually attend WC meetings came to one and made a pitch for WC members' participation. They did not get good results from the WC members; clinic defense never made a reappearance on the WC agenda, and if individual WC members did go, they did not recount the experiences during WC meetings.

WC members also used their status as official women to control how they used their time as activists, and GB male deference allowed them to take that control. Most WC members attended other committee meetings, and meetings proliferated, using up enormous amounts of time. This problem was compounded for WC members, since their visibility as official women brought with it demands that WC members—a core group of 10—represent women on other ACT UP/LA committees. For example, Max, the not-much loved editor of the newsletter, came to a WC meeting and tried to recruit WC members to the newsletter staff. He asked WC members to select someone to attend yet another meeting:

Women respond with head shakes, with Milly . . . saying that if Media is mostly concerned with getting out the newsletter, then it's "not fair" to ask one of the WC members to sit through another meeting, and that one of the Media Committee should instead come to the WC's meeting. This is agreed upon, and an extra WC meeting is set up for the next week. (WC meeting, 11/11/90)

No one's time was saved in this situation, since an extra meeting was set up; however, that meeting was a WC meeting, not a Media committee meeting. Max's proposal had been reformulated by the WC into something that would be under the WC's control, with his approval.

Representation was also at issue when another GB man, Jonathan, asked for a WC member to begin attending Treatment and Data committee meetings. Jonathan, unlike Max, was careful to preface his request with the need for women to attend an upcoming "Women and HIV" conference in Washington, noting that there were no women on the Treatment committee in Los Angeles (WC meeting, 11/25/90). Jonathan's proposal was responded to positively by WC members, but even so, action on Jonathan's proposal was delayed for a month until a WC member actually suggested that the WC send someone to the Treatment and Data meetings (I was the one sent). 

Deference toward the WC by GB men was not an absolute, as individuals varied in their attitude toward the WC. However, a deferential attitude toward the WC was present even when a GB male had trouble maintaining a properly enthusiastic tone in helping the WC, as in this instance where a GB member, Fabio, is showing the WC poster designs for an upcoming action:

Fabio seems conscious of the fact that he is bringing images to be approved by the group. . . . There seems to be a little bit of exasperation on Fabio's part. . . . He sighs and utters various phrases—"if that's what you want . . . if you want that . . . if you want me to come back next week I will. . . ." Lots of "if" statements indicate to me a tinge of fed-up-ness. (WC meeting, 11/11/90)
Fabio continued being helpful, agreeing to WC wishes with which he was clearly frustrated. Other GB members who had complaints about the WC were careful not to be identified. In one issue of *Tiara*, the ACT UP/LA gossip sheet, an anonymous (presumably male) GB member wrote in, calling the WC the "whining" caucus and taking issue with the WC's policy about male attendance at WC meetings. Significantly, the unnamed author hid behind anonymity and even then took issue not with the WC's existence but with their relationship to GB men.

The WC's status as official women in ACT UPnA gave the women the ability to call on GB support for their actions, and GB men generally did respond to requests for assistance from the WC. Men were supportive of the WC during meetings and attended WC-sponsored events; they allowed the WC to break rules that other committees/caucuses followed. WC members were also able, as visible and organized feminists, to elicit the very active support of a few feminist-identified—as opposed to feminist-friendly—men. These men put themselves at the WC's disposal and participated fully as members of the WC, policy permitting. The petitioner Dylan, for example, hosted speakers from a WC-sponsored Teach-in on women and AIDS at his house, picked up speakers up at the airport, and coordinated a "Safe-sex Vending" event that took place at a number of West Hollywood (women's and mixed) bars. Feminist-identified men were active participants in the WC despite their provisional status and showed consciousness of the need to let the women shape men's contributions:

I see Sam, who has been standing around in the back, on the right side of the room, passing out the pamphlets to everyone. He passes me by on the left side of the room as I am getting up... "Andrea's bossing me around and making me hand these out," he whispers [jokingly] to me as he hands me a pamphlet. (Women and AIDS Teach-in, 11/17/90)

As a visible, feminist caucus of women within a feminist-friendly organization, WC members became ACT UP/LA's official women, a status that gave the WC control over their agenda, their participation, and the efforts of supportive GB men. Boundary making ultimately allowed a small group of women to push forward a chosen women's agenda with the help of men who deferred to WC members' judgment and authority.

COMPARTMENTALIZATION: AN UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCE OF BOUNDARY MAKING

However rosy the picture of the WC's success, boundary making did not solve all of the WC's problems. They might have been official women in a feminist-friendly organization, but they were outnumbered by men. Feminist-friendly politics are not feminist politics. As a result of their numbers, the WC had chronic
problems working on feminist issues in a predominantly male organization because of slippage. As a result of their boundary making, WC members faced compartmentalization, the tendency for GB men to delegate all responsibility for women’s issues to the WC.

Compartmentalization can be seen as a negative outcome of boundary making and of the control that WC members were able to amass as official women. Deference by GB men toward the WC could and did turn easily into ignorance of the WC’s actions, a sense on the men’s part that the women were taking care of women’s things. In fact, by ceding control over a women’s agenda to the WC, GB members could consider themselves “good” on women and HIV issues, even as they took little notice of, and little personal action on, the issues themselves.

One member of the WC, Milly, wrote a two-page letter in June 1991 accusing the GB of compartmentalization. In response to what she saw as the “rubber-stamping” of a whimsical WC proposal changing a decision that the WC and GB had already made, Milly wrote,

Disregard is, in my mind, the worst kind of sexism. Whether intentional or not, when women’s issues or proposals made by a working group of women are brought to the floor, and are treated differently than those brought forward by any other working group in ACT UP, the message sent to women is that women and the topic of women and AIDS is [sic] devalued in the organization.

As noted above, WC proposals and committee reports were treated deferentially by GB men, mostly in ways that benefited the WC. However, Milly recognized as worrisome the tendency of most men in ACT UP/LA toward pushing all concerns about women and HIV onto the WC, compartmentalizing those issues, and structurally sanctioning their own ignorance.

WC members were aware of the compartmentalization of their agenda, and they were at times resentful that they could not count on the men to be as active on behalf of women as WC members were:

Milly tells the WC that the Treatment Committee asked her to find a second woman to go to the ACTGs in March. She says that she finds it “patronizing” that the GB wants to send two women to the ACTGs. . . . There is some discussion . . . with Jill and Maggie asking why the second person can’t be male. Milly says “there’s no reason why a man can’t look at women’s issues at the ACTGs,” but goes on to say that the fact is that the men don’t do as good a job of reporting [women’s] issues, and that the WC should send a second woman. (WC meeting, 1/27/91)

WC members tried to counter male ignorance of the issues surrounding women and AIDS, as indicated by their struggles over representation on ACT UP committees and the institution of WET minutes. Despite WC efforts, the compartmentalization of women’s issues was an ongoing problem for the small group of feminist activists, and it proved extremely difficult for WC members to separate the positive effects of being ACT UP’s official women from the negative ones.
CONCLUSION

The boundary-making strategies that WC members used to make themselves visible to the GB—formalizing women’s space and reinscribing gender difference—heightened ACT UP/LA’s awareness of women’s issues in the struggle against HIV disease, awareness that was subject to slippage because of the numerical dominance of men. The boundary that the WC drew between itself and the GB was legitimated by ACT UP/LA’s feminist-friendly politics, so that the feminist WC won a certain amount of deference from other members. Boundary making established WC members as official women; they moved squarely into the middle of ACT UP/LA’s political structure, gaining greater control over their agenda and participation, and a greater ability to claim the efforts of GB men on behalf of women’s issues. Becoming official women had its negative side in the compartmentalization to which women’s issues were subject. Thus, the WC’s boundary-making strategies were at once relatively successful and permanently problematic for feminists seeking greater visibility and power within ACT UP/LA.

Feminist organizing had salutary effects on AIDS protest locally and nationally. The WC’s boundary making ironically added to ACT UP/LA’s sense of solidarity. The presence of the WC in ACT UP/LA (like that of the People of Color Caucus) was an announcement to the group that some inclusiveness had been attained; this ran counter to the (negative) image of ACT UP/LA as an organization for gay white men. Male members recognized the potential contribution of feminist organizing to ACT UP/LA and supported the Women’s Caucus because they saw it as an incarnation of principles in which they believed. Thus, the WC was taken as a sign of ACT UP/LA’s health; making women more visible and powerful within the organization was a positive goal for activists who believed that “silence = death.”

At the national level, feminist organizing in ACT UP and other anti-AIDS groups countered trends toward accommodationism in the movement. Steven Epstein noted the particularly acute tension in ACT UP between “participation in the construction of scientific knowledge and the requirements of movement building” (1996, 351). While getting “drugs into bodies” required that many activists become closer to the political establishment, feminists turned their efforts toward those on the outside, keeping alive the issues of empowering HIV-positive people from all communities by challenging the distribution of health care resources. While these two trends often clashed within individual ACT UP chapters (Geltmaker 1992), feminist activity within the anti-AIDS movement kept open alternatives for protest that otherwise might have been eclipsed.

In general, more attention must be paid to the internal gender dynamics of challenger groups. Social movement theorists must recognize that even as organizations set themselves apart from the mainstream, the mainstream lets itself in; activists inhabiting different social locations in a structurally unequal society must consciously address the internal problems of solidarity engendered by that inequality. The case of the WC of ACT UP/LA suggests that feminist scholars interested in analyzing women’s social protest can fruitfully use concepts from social move-
Looking at the efforts of the WC leads us to wonder about the role of numbers versus ideology in mixed-gender protest organizations. There is a crucial difference between working for feminist issues in institutionalized versus noninstitutionalized settings. In contrast to Moss Kanter’s (1977, 210) argument that “tokens get attention” in institutionalized contexts, power in noninstitutionalized settings comes from amassing numbers, both within and without; the case of the direct-action antinuclear movement of the 1970s and 1980s, “made up of more or less equal numbers of men and women,” stands in direct contrast to the WC’s situation as a numerical minority within the male GB (B. Epstein 1991, 158), and an illustration by contrast of the WC’s difficulties. While we cannot discount the importance of men’s friendliness to feminism within the social protest organization, and while it is probably true that the more feminists, the friendlier an organization becomes, the practical effects of sheer numbers versus ideology certainly need further empirical examination.

Understanding internal gender dynamics can lead us to better explanations of how feminists actually accomplish what they do in mixed-gender protest groups. Katzenstein has argued that women’s efforts at mobilization within less-than-feminist-friendly settings have kept gender consciousness alive “once protest leaves the streets” (1990, 30). The members of the WC were still on the streets, working within a direct-action group organized around a nonfeminist agenda. Despite problems, the WC members ultimately moved toward their goal of making visible the situation of HIV-positive women. Their sustained work within ACT UP/LA suggests a continued need to look for loci of feminist practice in mixed-gender organizations.

In short, feminist politics can survive—with effort—in places other than feminist institutions and explicitly feminist protest groups. In the absence of a “third wave” of mass feminist mobilization, feminist women’s activism in other social movements bears watching, since such efforts represent consciously chosen and in no way inevitable strategies for women’s empowerment.

NOTES

1. The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, Los Angeles (ACT UP/LA) was formed in 1987. The other two caucuses, as distinct from committees, active during 1990-91, were the PISD (People with Immune System Disorders) Caucus and the People of Color Caucus.

2. Names have been changed for this article; actions and events have not been disguised.

3. I had worried about “coming out” as a researcher to the WC, given ACT UP’s militancy. When I requested that I be allowed to take field notes on meetings, one WC member said, “Oh, I was doing that all last time for my sociology class assignment.” In fact, during the year I participated, at least three graduate students were participant-observers in ACT UP/LA.

4. The AIDS Clinical Trial Groups (ACTGs) are the quarterly meetings of all those in the United States conducting AIDS drug trials with federal government money.
5. Trina’s graphics were made with women’s generally shorter torsos in mind, with designs placed high on the shirts so that they would not be lost if the shirt was tucked in. In general, ACT UP members were unusually sophisticated about the impact of graphic art in social protest (see Crimp 1990; Saalfield and Navarro 1991).

6. I came to make use of GB deference in my research. I took the “insider” stand that the Women’s Caucus (WC) had the authority to sanction my role as researcher vis-à-vis ACT UP/LA as a whole. I never asked the General Body (GB) for permission when I began attending those meetings; no one, male or female, ever suggested that I do so.

REFERENCES


Benita Roth received her Ph.D. from the University of California at Los Angeles in 1997. Her dissertation, "On Their Own and for Their Own: African American, Chicana and White Feminist Movements in the 1960s and 1970s," analyzed the emergence of feminism among women in different racial/ethnic groups in the second wave.
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