

THE CHALLENGE OF SYMBOLISM

MITCHELL KARP*

A few years ago, at a meeting between Salsa Soul Sisters¹ and Black and White Men Together (BWMT),² the women of color asked their black brothers: "Why are you getting into bed each night with whites who cannot help but be racist and who represent all that is wrong with this society?" The men of color responded by informing their sisters that the white men in BWMT were different; they at least were willing to look at racism and commit themselves to its eradication. A more piercing question was directed at the white male members. A woman put it this way: "I am a Caribbean, working class, lesbian mother committed to socialism What do I possibly have in common with you white, middle class gay men who benefit from racism, sexism, capitalism, and other forms of oppression?" To our credit, we white men did not flee the room. I felt naked and began to reexamine my own attitudes toward and commitment to fighting racism. Others explained that racism filled their lives with pain and fear of losing control, and that once recognized, these feelings could not be ignored. We were able to accept that, to these women, we were symbols. Moreover, we realized that it would take much time and energy before we could be perceived as individuals.

After years of therapy, I have struggled to reconcile competing emotions. I now almost accept that I can love and hate someone at the same time; that I can tolerate differences between myself and others. Somehow, it is more difficult to apply this principle to political awareness. At the core of this difficulty is our inability to accept that we, as human beings, are simultaneously "symbols" and "individuals." What does it mean to be a symbol? It means that we lose that which characterizes us as individuals. This loss of individuality is extremely threatening. In a society such as ours in which people desperately cling to their individuality, recognizing our symbolic roles is heresy. I believe that this reluctance to acknowledge our roles as symbols has been the bane of the lesbian and gay movement. If we do not consider our roles as symbols, we will never have any incentive to generalize beyond ourselves or to bond with others. In addition, unless we, as white men, are willing to acknowledge our role as symbols of the privilege historically and currently enjoyed by white

Copyright © 1986 by Mitchell Karp

* Staff attorney, New York City Commission on Human Rights AIDS Discrimination Unit. B.S., Cornell University, 1975; J.D., Rutgers Law School - Newark, 1981.

1. Salsa Soul Sisters is a New York based Third World women's community organization and social support group.

2. Black and White Men Together ("BWMT") is a multi-racial national organization with thirty chapters. The group is composed of gay men committed to fighting racism. The New York chapter of BWMT has been renamed Men of All Colors Together, Inc. I was at the time of this meeting, and continue to be, a member of this organization.

males, we will never confront institutional racism and sexism. In recent years, progress toward achieving these goals has been blocked by our failure to resolve the contradiction between our status as negative symbols in the eyes of our potential allies and our perceptions of ourselves as progressive people.

A large number of progressives in this country are minorities. Like it or not, we can only move forward to the extent that we are able to reach out to one another. Such progress requires serious efforts at coalition-building and networking. There are important differences between these two processes, yet it is possible to build coalitions and networks without losing sight of our separate agendas or losing our souls.

To illustrate the ways in which the symbol/individual dichotomy operates, let me use myself as an example. For the past six years, I have been an active member of Men of All Colors Together, a gay male anti-racist and anti-sexist organization. Yet the facts are inescapable that I, as a white man, am a symbol of racism, oppression, and patriarchy. Consequently, when I meet a person of color I have little or no control over the way I will be perceived. Even though I may say all the politically correct words, if I insist that people of color respond to me solely as an individual who is anti-racist, I will be denying my membership in a group that historically has promoted and has benefitted from three hundred years of racism. When this person of color and I meet, we bring our histories with us. Lest I get too theoretical, let me give an example from my recent past.

At the 1984 Convention of the National Association of Black and White Men Together, separate black and white caucuses were held. Each group was to meet for three hours and then come together for a joint session. The white caucus adjourned at the appointed hour and proceeded to the joint meeting room, only to discover that the blacks were still in the midst of their caucus. When the black facilitator came out to explain the delay, he said the whites should get together and sing, or do something fun, while they waited. Besides, he added, black people in many ways have been waiting for white people for three hundred years; the whites at the Convention can wait a few more minutes. Both the choice and the tone of his words deeply upset a number of the white participants.

When the joint session began, most of the time was spent trying to resolve this conflict. The black men spoke of their anger and pain at having to conform to white schedules, and at the lack of support demonstrated by their white brothers. The whites complained that they were tired of being classified as racists rather than the struggling anti-racists that they are. They announced their refusal to be grouped with white society at large; after all, had they not demonstrated their commitment to fighting racism by joining Black and White Men Together? Clearly, the blacks did not feel that this affiliation was sufficient. The black leader said that the conflict was emanating from the inability of whites to tolerate black leadership and rule-making. He then shared with the group a brief outline of his fifty years of enduring racial oppression, slan-

der, and mistreatment. He concluded that his white counterparts needed to educate themselves about black history so that they could understand what he had been through and why his reaction had been so intense.

Sadly, judging from the remarks afterward, his comments fell on deaf ears among the whites. Many felt hurt and refused to acknowledge the historical roots of this incident. Though they did not say it, I believe that the source of their pain was that they were being treated as symbols when, unfortunately, they saw themselves primarily as individuals. It also was unfortunate that the blacks failed to grasp that they can acknowledge white individuality and still respond effectively to the persisting oppression that their caucus and the incident had brought to the surface.

Although I speak of incidents where racism has been the central issue, the same holds true for sexism, homophobia, and class oppression. While I may be denying my role as a symbol, my counterpart of color simultaneously denies my status as an individual. This situation is compounded by the multiple symbols which are operative when, for example, a white middle class lesbian meets a working class latino gay male. Not only does a classic breakdown in communication occur, but there also arises an unwillingness to acknowledge the impact of history on our day-to-day interactions. While intellectually we may know that it is possible to hate and love someone at the same time, we fail to act accordingly. In political life, if there is to be any coalition-building or networking, it is essential that we recognize that we are both individuals and symbols.

I am aware that, for a variety of reasons, many of us have shied away from networking. We fear that our own agendas will become diluted. We feel that the task is just too overwhelming to undertake. We have been burnt by the manipulation of issues by special interest groups. We are impatient with the failure of other groups to grasp what we define as the essential issue.

The dictionary defines a coalition as "a temporary alliance of factions, parties, etc., for some specific purpose, as of political parties in times of national emergency."³ As Bernice Johnson-Reagon states:

You don't go into a coalition because you just like it. The only reason you would consider trying to team up with somebody who could possibly kill you, is because that's the only way you can figure you can stay alive Most of the time you feel threatened to the core and if you don't you're not really doing no coalescing.⁴

While I agree with Bernice's hard-headed approach to community politics, I would extend her analysis. Building coalitions is not enough; we must begin the arduous task of constructing networks. In contrast to a coalition, a network is defined as "an interconnected or interrelated chain, group or system; a

3. WEBSTER'S NEW TWENTIETH CENTURY DICTIONARY 345 (2d ed. 1978).

4. Johnson-Reagon, *Coalition Politics: Turning the Century*, in HOME GIRLS: A BLACK FEMINIST ANTHOLOGY 356 (B. Smith ed. 1983).

system of lines or channels that interlace or cross like the fabric of a net.”⁵

In the coalition politics of the 1970's, progressives tried, more or less, to ignore or de-emphasize personal differences. The dominant attitude was that we are all part of the same struggle. However, when the inevitable conflicts in our points of view surfaced and the negative symbols that we represented to each other took control of our perceptions, our coalitions withered. Is it any wonder that we cannot convince others of the justice of our struggle when we continue to ignore the political realities which keep us divided? Each year at the Gay Pride March thousands shout the slogan “Gay, straight, black, white, same struggle, same fight,” and unwittingly reinforce the lie that there can be unity without respect for our different life experiences, histories, and struggles. I much prefer the revised version, “Gay, straight, black, white, together we struggle, together we fight.” A minor change perhaps, but one which manifests a sensitivity to our differences.

Regardless of the term that we use, in coalition-building and networking there has been a distinct absence of bonding within and among the lesbian and gay communities. These communities are not unique in this failure: the left in general is plagued by it. However, if we believe our own rhetoric — that we are in fact everywhere — then ours is the perfect place to begin facing the challenge of building a network. I believe that there are important factors which have been ignored and which impede this essential bonding.

By recognizing that we are perceived as symbols, we acknowledge history. I believe that Jews, and possibly lesbians and gays, may have a headstart in this process. My father always told me not to forget that in the eyes of the world, no matter whatever else I was or became, I would still be a Jew, and that it was important for me to incorporate that fact into my awareness of myself and my interactions with others. While we Jews are often very adept at perceiving how others mistreat us as symbols, many of us are often blind to the ways in which others are equally oppressed, and to the need to acknowledge that we may be symbols of racism, sexism, and homophobia.

As lesbians and gay men, we must direct our energy towards understanding how others may view us as symbols. We must also remain aware of our role as outsiders in this society and use that awareness to support our courage in bonding and breaking down the barriers between us. For years, lesbian and gay leaders have been complaining that so many in our group believe themselves to be insulated from gay oppression and homophobia and, therefore, feel no need to join or actively support the movement for lesbian and gay rights. It is no coincidence that those who are insulated adamantly negate the importance of history and oppose affirmative action and other programs that acknowledge the effects of discrimination. They have embraced American individualism and insist on being viewed solely as individuals.

When we move into the political arena, it becomes apparent that this

5. WEBSTER'S at 1207.

perspective is both an incorrect view of history and self-destructive to the cause of lesbian and gay rights. It is a waste of time for members of the lesbian and gay rights movement to continue in their efforts to convince these people to join them in the streets. Progressive lesbians and gay men have a much better chance of bonding, and bonding in a more permanent way, with other progressive people to form a dynamic Left than with lesbians and gay men who embrace American individualism. Without a doubt, the process of examining our roles as symbols and of building a network is slow and difficult. But, at this juncture in time, we may have no other options.

