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Wrenching: On Building Coalitions

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The original Rainbow Coalition.

In the movie *Independence Day*, terrifying aliens show up to take over the earth, but something amazing happens: all the peoples of the planet join together--despite their differences--and successfully fend off the threat. We don't get a good look at this coalition, or how it forms, but it appears to encompass a vast swath of the spectrum of difference: race, gender, class, nation, religion, language...

It was a rainbow coalition, right out of Fred Hampton's playbook--except the enemies were colonizing aliens rather than colonizing capitalists. (The metaphor is pretty good, however.) Other examples of such coalitions include the Communist Party's organizing in the Black Belt in the 1930s, as well as the Young Lords' work in Chicago in the 1970s.

What do these coalitions show us about emerging forms of solidarity as we build the Left now? Specifically, what gets in the way of rainbow coalitions?

One answer is that folks belonging to various social categories are wrenched apart by the categories themselves. The best-known case is race and class. When it comes to race and class in the US, as Adolph Reed has long argued, the ruling class wins when race wrenches workers apart.

Racism is thus a tool the ruling class uses to make sure workers don't get together and get rid of them. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor has articulated the same insight in reference to the Black Lives Matter movement and the recent Women's Marches.

But that phenomenon--wrenching--can and does happen in many struggles, both between and within many social categories. Wrenching is one of the things that can keep the Left from getting together and warding off threats to the planet.

How Wrenching Works

Wrenching works like this. There is a ruling set with certain nefarious structural interests. The ruling set could be the ruling class (capitalism), white supremacists (racism), cis-male patriarchy (gender oppression), heterosexual norms (sexual oppression), able-bodies (ableism)...and others.

Adolph Reed, building on a long tradition of thinking, has pointed out that racism divides the working classes and helps capitalists maintain power. Yet we know this same thing happens in other social categories. Racism divides women in their struggle against patriarchy. It divides queer communities in their struggle against normativity.

But racism isn't the only wrench dividing subordinated sets when making gains against the ruling sets. Class divisions wrench African Americans apart in their struggle against white supremacy. Gender divisions wrench queer folks apart in their struggle against heteronormativity.

In each case, wrenching has the same form but different contents: in the struggle of a subordinated set against a ruling set within one social category, another social category--adjacent to their struggle--divides the subordinated set.

That's wrenching: when a subordinated set is struggling against a ruling set in one social category and the subordinated set is divided by another social category orthogonal to their struggle.

Workers fight capitalists, but racism divides them, and capitalists keep exploiting. Women fight patriarchy, classism divides them, and the patriarchy stays strong. In each case there's a wrench: racism is the wrench in the first and classism is the wrench in the second.

But the thing is, there's never just one wrench. There are always wrenches. In any given struggle there will be multiple wrenches with different salience, as intersectional sociologists like Patricia Hill Collins point out. You might work through the race problems in your union, but next up is the patriarchy and then the heteronormativity and then the ableism and transphobia...

Wrenching is gut-wrenchingly powerful and complex. But if you've ever quit something difficult to quit, you know that the first step to getting rid of the problem is knowing that you have one. Then hopefully you can do something about it. Same goes for wrenching (hopefully).

Taking Out the Wrenches

The concept helps. 'Wrenching' names a key barrier to coalition and accomplicing: wrenching wrenches us apart as we fight against the ruling sets. But a wrench is also a human made object, a tool, and tools can be used or not used for various purposes. They can be manipulated and moved around. So what do we do about the wrenches?

First, we have to find the wrenches, be clear that they are tools the ruling sets use to divide us. This isn't easy to do. Most organizations are only sort of aware that there are a number of wrenches dividing them from one another and other groups. If they do know about the wrenches, it probably hasn't been made crystal clear that these wrenches were put in the works by the the ruling sets in order to divide them (or at least have that effect).

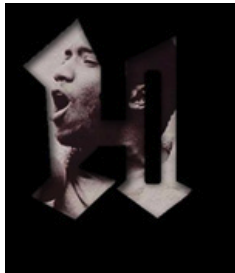
After finding the wrenches, we have to pick the most salient one and take it out, which can be a painful process full of friction. It must be slow, careful, intentional. Workshops, discussions, debriefs. There will be mistakes. False starts. Hurt feelings. Time "wasted." It won't happen immediately, and if you try to take the wrench out quickly without the right plan the machine could fall apart, particularly if it's been in there for a long time.

After that we have to find the other wrenches and take them out too. After the first time, it should be easier--but each wrench is different and might require starting all over again.

Finally, we put the wrenches into our tool box and save them if we need them in our work. We probably don't want to use them against our enemies since they're the master's tools, as Audre Lorde said.

Maybe, at the very least, we should keep the wrenches to remember how they were used against us so as not to let it happen again, and also remember the process for removing them in case another one gets lodged in the works.

Wrenching need not divide us. The time for removing these tools of the ruling classes is now. Somehow the people in *Independence Day* did it. Like them, our world can't wait.



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