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# Theme One

## From Solidarity to Affinity and Feminist Communal Identities

Saskia Wieringa

### Introduction

The backbone of the EFF were the Affinity Groups. What does 'affinity' mean in the context of social movement theory, and how did it replace earlier organizational models based on sisterhood and solidarity? Is it possible to overcome the inherent problems of European feminism, its fragmentation and its lack of a strong common stand, and to build a stable and sustainable European women's movement on the affinity group model? More particularly, has it been possible for the different Affinity Groups to overcome their oppositional identities and to start building a communal feminist forum that can contribute to constructing a Europe that is based on gender and social justice? In the following I assess the experience of building the EFF by focusing on affinity as the basis for organizing.

### Sisterhood and solidarity

In the 1970s and 1980s two major debates dominated feminism and particularly its potential to mobilize resistance against women's subordination: around sisterhood and solidarity. The concept of sisterhood had become a key concept around the beginning of the second wave of feminism but was soon criticized for its bourgeois, racist overtones and for the totalitarian approach, based on the interests of its protagonists. Because it focused on the concerns of white middle-class women, large numbers of women felt excluded from the call to an all-women's sisterhood, supposedly based on a similarly experienced oppres-

sion. Solidarity was then proposed to replace the call for sisterhood, in a bid to incorporate women with diverging interests.

From the 1990s onwards postmodern thinkers criticized the essentialism upon which both these concepts were based. In its turn many feared, myself included, that the postmodern emphasis on the conditionality of truth claims might undermine the whole feminist project: how to build a strong political movement when the 'truth' of any one position is never given? More recently the call for feminist politics based on the principles of affinity is heard. Under what conditions can organizing around the principle of affinity contribute to effectively strategizing against gender-based and other kinds of oppression and injustice? How can a new Europe be built that is governed along principles of social and gender justice?

In the development in feminist thinking from sisterhood to affinity and analyses there have been several dilemmas, such as fragmentation and political powerlessness. Feminist communal organizing can be seen as a positive force of change, and it is here we can place the formation of Affinity Groups, which are built on resistance identities. The EFF can be seen as an attempt at feminist organizing based on the principle of affinity, the Secretariat of which was located within the International Information Centre and Archives for the Women's Movement (IIAV) in Amsterdam.

### **Principles of the European Feminist Forum**

The EFF was organized on the principles of organization from the bottom up and non-hierarchy. Neither feminism nor Europe were presented as pre-defined concepts. Rather, individuals were invited to advance the concerns they considered important for a feminist and Europe-based forum. The IIAV-based Secretariat mobilized all-European Affinity Groups with the use of advanced information and communications technologies (ICT), via video conferences, and an interactive website, built on 2.0 technology. However successful the Affinity Groups were (at some stage over 3000 people all over Europe participated in the dialogues), in the end it was impossible to hold the face-to-face meeting that was visualized from the beginning, as the required funds for this major event could not be raised. Thus the hundreds of self-defined European feminists in the EFF did not convene in June 2008 to build a feminist agenda for the EU. Was this a conceptual failure, pointing to the impossibility of forming a feminist communal platform on the basis of resistance identities or did we just run up against the practical limits of feminist organizing within the European context?

### **Theorizing sisterhood and solidarity**

In the 1970s the burgeoning women's movement in the West saw the need to stimulate the creation of a feminist consciousness. It did so by stressing the commonality of women's oppression in the family, sexuality, economics and politics. The fight against sexism and patriarchy, it was thought, would only be won if all women would realize the common cause of these evils and act in solidarity with each other (Morgan 1970). Not only Western women, it was argued, but women the world over suffered from similar forms of oppression and should act together based on the inner bond of womanhood (Morgan 1984).

Starting in the early 1980s an uneasiness grew with the concept of sisterhood defined in this way.

Women of colour charged that the notion of sisterhood was grounded in a white bourgeois feminism that disregarded issues of race and class (Hooks 1984; Mohanty 2003). They suggested the concept of 'solidarity' was strategically more powerful. It rested, they argued, not on the assumption of sameness of oppression and allowed for a greater differentiation (for instance, as far as class and ethnicity were concerned) of the roots of oppression. The inner bond that would naturally lead to solidarity was not a pre-given, stable phenomenon, so they maintained, but should be constructed in practical political struggles.

Hooks claimed that solidarity cannot grow of itself but needs a sustained, ongoing commitment. Mohanty, writing on transnational feminism, adds that solidarity should not be seen as a pre-given phenomenon but should be constituted in practice, through the process of working together. Thus the challenge is 'to construct the universal on the basis of particulars/differences' (Mohanty 2003: 7). This opened up wide debates on differences between women and the possibilities of organizing around differences. What was needed was not a solidarity based on sameness, but action built on a coalition of 'solidarity [constructed] among strangers', as Dean posited (1996).

These views echoed concerns of other theorists of social movements, such as Melucci (1989) and Castells (1997). Melucci, coming from a background of socialist organizing, denounces the 'totalizing influence of integralist movements', with their 'bigoted, judgmental' attitudes (1989: 181). Castells focuses on the new identity-based movements in what he calls the 'information age', who act in a networking, decentred form of organization and intervention. He detects in these networks of social change – 'these back alleys of society' – the 'embryos of a new society, labored in the fields of history by the power of identity' (1997: 362).

### **Postmodern critiques**

Many of these feminist and other thinkers on social movements were influenced by the postmodernist deconstruction of both the truth claims of various modernist projects (such as Marxism and liberalism) and of the supposed unitary subject of these modern streams of thinking. It was realized that the subject should be seen not as an essential entity with pre-given characteristics and interests, but as a constructed one (Benhabib 1992; Butler 1992). Rather than working within established theoretical traditions, postmodernist thinkers are thinking in terms of multiple truth claims and heterogeneous identities; they 'think in fragments', as Flax lucidly wrote (1990).

Contrary to those who worked from the idea of a sisterhood which is 'always already there' and in which the feminist subject was constituted in advance, the idea took root that individuals are constructed through a process of interacting and associating with others. As Bourdieu put it, individuals are socialized in their particular habitus, which both organizes their behaviour and produces the emotions belonging to them, which come to construct the 'body knowledge' of an individual (Bourdieu 1980). Women, and for that matter all subjects, are primarily discursively constructed; their position or behaviour is not naturally given. This creates a dilemma for feminist politics. As phrased by Haraway: if 'there is nothing about being "female" that naturally binds women', then who should feminist movements represent (Haraway 1991: 155)? Haraway is the first feminist author to discuss the possibilities of a politics of coalition-building built on affinity: 'This [postmodernist] identity marks out a self-consciously constructed space that cannot affirm the capacity to act on the basis of natural identification, but only on the basis of conscious coalition, of affinity, of political kinship' (Haraway 1991: 156).

Thinking about feminist and sexual politics on the basis of affinity opens the ground for the building of rainbow coalitions, constructed on shifting political practices. According to the political project at hand a coalition is erected around that project, of people and organizations who, from whatever position they stand, agree to collaborate on that issue. Thus the web of solidarity is cast much wider: one doesn't have to 'be' a transgender, or a lesbian, or a member of a minority ethnicity or religion, to fight for a particular cause. This is a great step forward from the 1970s, when I remember that fights were waged as to who might enter the Amsterdam women's house that had recently been squatted by us. Only 'real' women (whoever that might be), or also MTF transgenders? (Male-bodied plumbers or electricians were totally banned; this had disastrous effects on the overall condition of the house at a time when hardly any women had entered those professions.)

### **Dead end? Challenges to 'women' as a category**

But how to build a coherent political strategy on the basis of multiple truths and fleeting identities? Many feminists assert that postmodern feminism, which sees gender as a construction and challenges 'women' as a category, is a dead end for political feminism as a movement. Whelehan, for instance, articulates one of the common critiques of postmodern anti-essentialism (i.e. the absence of a unified, stable, universal subject) when she notes that the postmodern feminist positioning is politically self-defeating from the very start. Postmodern feminism describes itself as 'merely' one of many discourses, and this positioning provides no tools to defend itself against other 'current materially and economically powerful political truth claims' (Whelehan 1996: 198). According to this argument, postmodern feminism is a useless political stance, as 'without a shared experience of oppression – an identity – political demands cannot be articulated in the first place' (Lloyd 2005: 55). A second critique touches also

upon anti-essentialism but approaches it from a different angle: it argues against the postmodern understanding of identity 'as unstable and thus merely "strategic"', and criticizes it for seeing identity 'as either naive or irrelevant' (Mohanty 2003: 6).

Identities are thus an important basis for organizing; they are neither unitary nor flimsy. But what kind of political identities are we talking of? Not the integralist, bigoted identity that only sees itself as truth. Do resistance or oppositional identities form a better vantage point from which to organize feminist politics? This seems indeed most likely, but then the next question is how to move from opposition, resistance, negation, to positive demands? To an agenda for change? An agenda that incorporates the manifold interests of the multiple oppressions identified, and that is valid for the widely divergent contexts of the EU? And sees building a more equal Europe as a gendered process?

### **The emergence of affinity**

Does the concept of affinity and the practice of building non-hierarchical, self-defined Affinity Groups provide a way out of this postmodern conundrum? How was the concept of affinity deployed? The organizers of the EFF decided to build a European platform in line with the notion of affinity as used by Haraway (1991) and consistent with Mouffe's work on collective identities (Mouffe 2005: 2). Contrary to the idea of an identity based on solidarity, affinity does not have to be founded on an underlying consensus among members of the group; political identities are formed in an act of negating the constructed 'them' (Lloyd 2005: 163). It is thus not the commonality of the 'us' that binds the affinity group, but rather the fight against a common – or at least commonly defined – enemy. The process of defining and thus constructing the enemy, be it racism, sexism or capitalism, binds the identity of those who decide to oppose it. There appears thus a

political frontier between the 'we' and the 'them' by the act of articulation: new subject positions need to be named and accounted for through the negation of certain 'them', for example, as anti-racism, anti-sexism, anti-capitalism. Thus new, pragmatic and contingent political identities arise when a political conflict is voiced: so-called resistance or oppositional identities.

There is no pre-given identity, neither of the 'we' nor of the 'them', the enemy, previous to the process of articulation and differentiation. So the issue of solidarity shifts, from the commonality of oppression to having a common enemy. This process is deeply political and always entails the ethical responsibility of making decisions about unavoidable exclusions. Mouffe uses the Derridian concept of deciding upon the 'undecidable' to indicate the conceptual impossibility of overcoming differences in the democratic system, which means that power, and therefore exclusion, constitutes every social system and every temporary consensus; that is why conflict is, and should be, constitutive to a truly pluralist democracy (Mouffe 2000: 136–7).

However, conflict, resistance and opposition are important in mobilizing people around commonly defined individual causes, but the problem remains how can these oppositional forces, once mobilized, turn from resistance towards building a community that can help shape a more just and equal future? This process of articulating the enemy other or mobilizing around common causes is a discursive process in the broadest sense. Not only are subversive texts produced, at the same time oppositional practices also emerge. The Affinity Groups that the EFF organizers mobilized could be seen as laboratories of feminist web-based practices (to paraphrase Melucci), using new methods of communication, other ethics of congregation, struggling to find new concepts to define their interests. The major challenge was how to create a communal identity

out of these isolated interest groups. How to glue these diverse discourses together into a coherent entity able to envision a pathway to a future Europe?

Prior to Haraway's discussion of affinity the concept was articulated in anarchist circles. The first Affinity Groups were characterized by a commitment to direct action, close personal relationships and an absence of hierarchical structure. The idea of Affinity Groups comes from the anarchist and workers' movements of late nineteenth century Spain, who later fought against fascism during the Spanish Civil War. It spread to Latin America, where it was able to mobilize thousands of working women and men and continues to inspire activism (Villavicencio 1995). At the same time that the Affinity Group model was being adopted by the anti-war movement in the 1960s, small 'consciousness-raising' groups of women were forming. These in turn were inspired by the Black Consciousness Movement in the USA (Wieringa 2006). Thus action repertoires were imitated and transformed to suit variously experienced injustices.

Feminist action repertoires went through various phases. From the late 1960s onwards there was a 'transformation of feminist notions of political intervention' (Whelehan 1996: 8). Feminists were breaking with 'both traditional lobbying tactics and to some extent [...] left-wing oppositional politics', which were dominated by men and offered no space for women's agendas (Whelehan 1996: 8). Picking up methods and practices along the way, feminist mobilizing was characterized by small consciousness-raising groups, large demonstrations, the building of a feminist counter culture, with its own media and centres, and lobbying (the long march through the institutions). The Affinity Groups of the EFF are the latest phase in this process. They are inspired by reflections both on previous ways of organizing (around sisterhood and solidarity) and on the anti-globalization

movement and the ways in which young people get involved in social movements.

### **The European Feminist Forum<sup>5</sup>**

The Amsterdam-based IIAV was among the initiators of the EFF and took on the role of housing the international Secretariat to facilitate the process. A number of leading European networks were the EFF's engine. These include the KARAT Coalition, a network of women's NGO's from Central and Eastern Europe, the Network of Women in Development in Europe (WIDE) and ASTRA, the Central and Eastern European Women's Network for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights. It is striking that initiatives and networks from Central and Eastern Europe seem to have been better represented than Western and Northern European movements.

The IIAV preserves the history and cultural heritage of women's movements and develops information services to make historical and contemporary material regarding women's lives and experiences accessible (Wieringa 2008). The IIAV's innovative approach to using ICT for women's movements worldwide (McDevitt-Pugh 2008) made a significant contribution to the EFF's design, placing it in the vanguard of feminist organizing today. Documenting and preserving existing knowledge is a challenging undertaking, as is creating an environment where the knowledge that is needed to influence the future can be produced. This is why the IIAV offered to facilitate the EFF process: to allow feminists of diverse national, professional and activist backgrounds to network and organize across a range of issues, forming new alliances and setting up strategic new political agendas to bring about change in Europe (Dütting & Semeniuk 2008). The various trajectories of the

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5 The following analysis of the EFF is partly based on the article by Dütting and Semeniuk (2008) in Wieringa (2008) and discussions with the authors and Lin McDevitt-Pugh of the IIAV, as well as some internal documents.





organizers involved in this process, as presented in the first section of this monograph, offer a fascinating insight into the diversity of experiences that made all of us decide that this model of organizing would suit the present phase of European feminist organizing best.

The EFF organizers' idea was that a variety of different groups could be formed – preferably groups that would cross national borders (IIAV 2007). No agenda was set beforehand; issues were not defined previous to the call to form Affinity Groups. They also believed that the groups could include participants who did not immediately identify as feminists. Therefore, alliances would not require previous solidarity. The groups would use the affinity group model to start a debate within the framework of the EFF. These Affinity Groups would be a meeting point for both organizations as well as individuals. It was felt that this type of loose organization would be close to the realities of European women's movements today. Increasingly, political and feminist groups have scarce resources and little money. In Western Europe, the women's movement has lost most of its funding over the last 15 years. Consequently, most feminists do not have financially sound organizations behind them. Many feminists are employed outside the women's movement and do their feminist work on a volunteer basis. Recently, this process has also affected the Central and Eastern European countries that have joined the EU (Lohmann 2007 and this volume).

Does the affinity group model adopted by the organizers and the use of a postmodern theoretical framework stand up to the critique on postmodern politics as articulated above? Who were the subjects, and what were defined as the dividing lines between 'us' and 'them' in organizing the EFF? The open attitude of the group, which decided it didn't want to foreclose debates by defining beforehand who might be included or what issues were considered important, had a

wide resonance. Within one year the affinity group structure resulted in numerous events, articles, common plans for action, a website full of materials, and a vast network of committed people. All that time the organizers never once discussed who 'women' were or what 'feminism' was. They did not debate whether men could be part of feminist movements, and, in fact, an Affinity Group of male feminists was formed. They became a part of the EFF because they answered the initial open call to get involved. In the call, the EFF organizers invited 'all interested in a broad forum on key issues for feminists across Europe, however they wish to define Europe'. Therefore, without discussing what could be defined as 'Europe', Affinity Groups were also based in Central Asia and the South Caucasus. By answering the call, a new Europe was defined (Dütting & Semeniuk 2008).

The only way in which the organizers defined, and in a sense arbitrarily 'closed', the forum was when they named it the *European Feminist Forum*. The Secretariat concluded that this name opened up the subject more than it narrowed it, allowing for a redefinition of 'European' and 'feminist', which is indeed what happened. A variety of people accepted the invitation that previously might not have been included in these categories, and new groups simply emerged, inspired by this open call.<sup>6</sup> The groups started to work towards common strategies and were looking for shared goals to enable them to unite forces to advance concrete points on their agendas. But the non-event of the EFF did not make it possible to bring this process to a temporary conclusion and to see whether a defined 'European feminist' subject emerged in this process. So the outcome is not clear, and indeed the question emerges of whether it would be at all desirable. The aim was to build alliances,

<sup>6</sup> An example is the formation of a network of Imazighen (Berber) feminists in The Netherlands who had not been previously organized.



to create ideas, inspiration and energy, and to enlarge the collective 'we' as European feminists (Dütting & Semeniuk 2008). Whether such a loosely defined 'European feminist "we"' would have been able to build a communal feminist identity pushing towards an agenda to help transform Europe is another issues of debate.

### **Reflecting on the praxis of feminist organizing**

Does this model of organizing stand up to Whelehan's and Mohanty's critiques of the pitfalls of postmodern feminism? Does it allow for the formation of stable feminist identities able to make a political fist? Or does this form of postmodernist feminism always remain virtually apolitical? Chantal Mouffe defends the ability of this position to construct collective identities, by stating that political subjects are always necessarily collective subjects, constructed along the 'we'/'they' binary. By spotting the adversaries ('they'), the political 'we' emerges, from which 'they' are excluded. Mouffe recognizes that the political sphere is always governed by a hegemonic discourse of the most powerful group (Mouffe 2000: 21). However, she argues that every political 'we' desires such hegemony – even a 'we' defining themselves as postmodern feminists. To challenge the current hegemonic discourse and to struggle against subordination, politically identified groups need to enter the political sphere and challenge current interpretations of the principles on which the political sphere rests. (Mouffe 2005: 150). Thus by definition the Affinity Groups are political entities, as in the process of constructing themselves they articulate a common agenda against a particular enemy, which is a deeply political process. The question remains whether a politics based on these resistance identities is able to formulate a common agenda for change.

Mohanty's critique is that postmodern relativism renders identity-based politics irrelevant, as identities are seen as inherently unstable. Her

position is thus based on an almost essentialized subject position as the basis of identity-formation. However, when identities are seen as being constructed on a political, contextualized basis, Mohanty's position become less relevant. This was also the view of the organizers, who countered that there is no point in 'eradicating' the identities of those involved in the Affinity Groups. After all, the new European feminist identities that they hoped might be formed would never amount to a single position, but would always be based on the multiple, sometimes contradictory, oppression the members of the EFF identified, but they would nevertheless be experienced as 'real', and as so powerful as to warrant organizing on the basis of them.

They were aware that postmodern feminist thought is often criticized for originating in the ivory tower of academia and having nothing to do with everyday women's struggles. Butler's 'performativity' theory, for instance, is often misconstrued as pointing to identities as phenomena that can be changed as one changes one's set of clothes (Butler 1992). However, there is no contradiction between the idea that identities are constructed (and thus being open to transformation) and the realization that identities thus constructed affect women in real, often painful, ways. Translated to the formation of Affinity Groups, this meant to construct a European feminist identity incorporating multiple oppressions. Conceptually then the affinity group model the EFF organizers adopted looked attractive and was successful, as many thousands of self-identified European feminists joined the discussion fora, formulated their issues, organized themselves and put new issues on the agenda.

Practically there were numerous obstacles that in the end brought the process to a premature end and prevented the actual face-to-face meeting of the EFF from taking place. Apart from mobilizing so many women and men, the concrete end-prod-

ucts of this whole experiment in feminist organizing are now a youth forum, and this monograph that synthesizes the process. What prevented the EFF from becoming a total success? A number of barriers have to be mentioned: the diversity of European languages and the large distances in Europe, the opposition between a professional organization such as the IIAV and the mostly unfunded, volunteer-based networks, and the limitation of the organizing efforts to those people with access to the Internet.

The process of constructing Affinity Groups relied heavily on Internet-mediated communication, with all its drawbacks. Access to ICT, like access to other previously existing media for transmitting and sharing knowledge, is far from universal. In relying on it 'there is a danger of sliding into the world divided between the info-poor and the info-rich, with women, as we know only too well, ending up at the gates of technology and information' (Arizpe 1999: 15). Limiting participation to the 'info-rich' is a common failure of all social organizing in cyberspace. At present, access to email is rather common, but the 2.0 technology that was used by the Affinity Groups is still beyond the grasp of many, particularly older and poorer people.

A major stumbling block for the Affinity Groups was the limited organizational capacity of the participating networks and organizations. They all grappled with a lack of resources; this problem prevented the growth of each group and constrained the scope of activities that they were able to undertake. Most groups lacked the security that sufficient funds, paid staff and available time make possible. Groups had to rely on volunteer labour to keep the process going. They found it difficult to branch out beyond their core group (Dütting & Semeniuk 2008). The IIAV, on the other hand, is a professional organization with paid staff and strict control mechanisms in place.

Not only does this result in a conflict between working styles, it also leads to financial inequalities. A large part of the limited budget that was raised was gobbled up by salaries at the IIAV, while the volunteers didn't get paid. This led to tensions. On the other hand, without the drive and the time investment of the IIAV-funded Secretariat, the immense effort to organize such a far-reaching process could never have been made.

A major problem for European feminist organizing is the diminishing support for women's organizing at the national level, while at the European level there are hardly any funds available (and if there might be funding possibilities the prohibitive bureaucracy involved deters many groups from going after it).

### Conclusion

The affinity model is attractive and has certain possibilities for creating resistance identities, formulating feminist positions and facilitating feminist organizing. In this information age the affinity model is mobilizing large numbers of people quickly and effectively using modern web-based techniques. It allows for the open, flexible formation of identities that are not bigoted and judgemental, working from rigid, judgemental (integralist) positions. The interests thus identified are not pre-defined and closed. As the example of the EFF demonstrates, the Affinity Groups were able to do justice to the diversity of concerns that have been expressed, and new issues were raised. The model also allowed for a wide variety of views and analyses on the issues brought forward. It created space for the incorporation of very diverse local contexts, and it allowed a sufficient sense of 'we' to facilitate exchange and future action among diverse groups. This framework has the possibility of overcoming the political inertia that postmodernist feminism has created in many quarters, while it still draws upon postmodernism's valid contributions on subjects and diversity.

In addition, the Affinity Groups were non-hierarchical and were able to build themselves in novel ways, gradually articulating their own positions while focusing on what they opposed. They were inclusive, not working from pre-established concerns. The mobilizing power of the affinity model is encouraging, particularly because of its flexibility and openness. The use of new media makes it possible to have a wide exchange of ideas and to reach an audience that otherwise might not be so inclined to join a feminist network.

The problems identified on the path towards the face-to-face meeting of the EFF seem to be mainly pragmatic: lack of funds, difficulties in communicating due to language and distance barriers, lack of time and organizational capabilities due to a volunteer-based model. But it would be an illusion to see these issues as merely practical. For they do point to a serious concern, namely the inbuilt instability of the model, its lack of sustainability and the inevitable contradiction between a professional way of organizing and a more spontaneous, flexible one. With only a very small secretariat as its anchor it was not yet possible to move from the building of resistance identities to a communal feminist position able to make a dent in the armour of the huge moloch of EU bureaucracy. In fact, it is doubtful whether EU bureaucrats, even those dealing with gender issues, were aware of what was happening around the Affinity Groups.

A serious challenge is thus how to create an affinity group model that is sustainable. That is able to deal with the inevitable hierarchy of professionalization that funders require. And that yet remains flexible and transparent and able to mobilize the enthusiasm of diverse groups. This requires not only new theorizing along the lines of political mobilization that the affinity model allows, but also a new feminist politics: idealist yet pragmatic, professional, transparent, able to build alliances with diverse groups as well as established inter-

ests. The thinking that goes with this should move beyond closing ranks in opposition to constantly differently defined enemies. The professionalism required for dealing with complex organizational problems and huge amounts of funding needs more stability than shifting identifications and fragmented truths allows.

As the EFF experience was cut short, it is not possible to assess whether the model itself would have been able to transcend the resistance model of identity formation. It has not yet demonstrated its capacity to form strong, sustainable networks based on communal feminist identities. The Affinity Groups can be seen as the laboratories from which these identities may grow in the future.