

Antagonisms between bourgeois and coalitional formations

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A speech that the singer, activist and historian Bernice Johnson Reagon gave at the 1981 West Coast Women's Music Festival was published two years later in the classic anthology *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, edited by the Black lesbian feminist Barbara Smith. The speech is entitled 'Coalition Politics: Turning the Century', and in it, Reagon argues that coalitional work must be foundational for late twentieth century organising.* Here Reagon – a former member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the founder of the Black women's leftist singing ensemble Sweet Honey in the Rock – was referring to coalitions among leftist activists and social movements rather than coalitions between nation-states. In particular, she was speaking during a time in which the women's movement was struggling over how to come together amid differences of race, ethnicity, sexuality and class. Reflecting on the importance of the speech for that moment and for *Home Girls*, Smith said over thirty years later: 'I always tell people, the reason "Coalition Politics: Turning the Century" is the last piece in the book is because that's what I wanted people to leave the book with: the idea of working together across differences ... The only way that we can survive is by working with each other, and not seeing each other as enemies'.¹

I begin with Reagon's speech and the memory of it because I believe that coalitions among progressive forces are very much at stake in our present day. In addition, I am interested in the formations that try to prevent them. As such, I'd like to concentrate on bourgeois formations and their emergence in neocolonial and neoliberal con-

texts as principal antagonists to progressive coalitions. More specifically, neocolonialism and neoliberalism have represented the conditions for the emergence of bourgeois formations that have withered the insurgent demands and possibilities of various radical coalitions. In this essay, I'll refer to several bourgeois formations (Western, Black, and briefly LGBTQ+), but I focus quite a bit in this essay on the Black bourgeoisie because of its longstanding history and the opportunities that it provides for observing an early model minority.

As a result, I am not simply addressing the bourgeoisie in the classic Marxist sense – as a class that owns the means of production and exploits labour. The bourgeois formations that I discuss – ones made up of minoritised subjects – have an uneven relationship to property and labour. Sometimes they possess productive and labour forces. Sometimes they don't. They do, however, aspire to the normative status of the archetypical bourgeois subject (i.e., Western, white, heteropatriarchal) and thus try to socially reproduce the regulatory norms, practices and infrastructures of dominant institutions (i.e., the state, the family, capital, the academy, etc.). They understand their social differences as sometimes obstacles to, and at other times catalysts for, that reproduction. And in the effort to reproduce dominant institutions, the lower classes and non-normative subjects among and near them become resources for discipline and exploitation.

The contexts of neocolonialism and neoliberalism provide unique windows into these aspects of bourgeois formations among the minoritised. The first thing that

* This article, and that of Gail Lewis which follows in the issue, were given as public lectures at the University of British Columbia, located on the unceded and ancestral lands of the Musqueam First Nation, in October 2022. As Visiting Professors at Green College, Roderick Ferguson and Gail Lewis convened an interdisciplinary workshop and delivered lectures on the theme of 'Coalitional Possibilities'.

we might say is that both neocolonialism and neoliberalism emerge out of the contexts of formal emancipation – that is, out of the discourse of rights. As such they both bear the trappings of independence but also resuscitate the inequalities of their antecedents and produce new types of inequalities.

In ‘On the Jewish Question’, Marx identified formal emancipation this way: ‘The limits of political emancipation appear at once in the fact that the state can liberate itself from a constraint without man himself being really liberated; that a state may be a free state without man himself being a free man’.² Here Marx identifies emancipation on the state’s terms as a faux emancipation. Neocolonial and neoliberal regimes arise out of this contradiction of formal emancipation – that is, the state’s presumed liberation from social constraints and the population’s continued subjugation through those constraints.

Consider, for instance, Kwame Nkrumah’s definition of neocolonialism as a response to anti-colonial milit-

ancy in the global south in *Neo-colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*. In it he writes: ‘Faced with the militant peoples of the ex-colonial territories in Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, and Latin America, imperialism simply switches tactics’. Dispensing with its paraphernalia and its representatives, former colonial powers would surrender their authority, give independence to former subjects and follow that surrender with aid and development. With flags and officials gone, the colonial apparatus would begin to ‘devise innumerable ways to accomplish objectives formerly achieved by naked colonialism’. Neocolonialism – or the ‘modern [attempt] to perpetuate colonialism while at the same time talking about “freedom”’ – would be born as global capital’s answer to insurgent movements.³

Six years before Nkrumah’s book, Aimé Césaire touched on the essence of neocolonialism in his lecture at the 1959 Congress of Negro Writers and Artists in Paris. There he said, ‘One too often sees perpetuated or reconstituted within the societies constituted by nations which



have been liberated from the colonial yoke, structures which are in truth colonial or colonialist'.⁴ For Césaire, the repetition of colonial structures under the ruse of independence produced the conditions for the emergence of the native-born and neocolonial bourgeoisie. As he said, 'Inside imperfectly decolonized nations, there is a danger that typically colonialist phenomenon of recurrence will be seen to emerge at any moment, utilized no longer by a colonialist or imperialist, but by a group of men or a class of men, who from that moment, inside the liberated nation, take on the role of the Epigoni of colonialism and use the instruments invented by colonialism'.⁵ In this context, the native and neocolonial bourgeoisie emerges as the offspring not of decolonisation but of its incompleteness. In Marx's terms, bourgeois formations have arisen out of the ethos of formal rather than real emancipation. They are thus the representatives of an incomplete emancipation.

Neoliberalism in liberal democratic states arises out of a formal emancipation that seemingly responds to social protest as well. For instance, in her definition of neoliberalism, historian and theorist Lisa Duggan writes: 'The culture wars strategy allowed emerging neoliberal forces to attack and isolate the cultures of downward redistribution located within social movements since the 1960s. The flip side of this strategy was the nurturing of forms of "identity politics" recruitable for policies of upward redistribution ... Neoliberalism's emergent strategy for the new millennium: A new "equality" politics compatible with a corporate world order'.⁶ In our article, 'The Sexual and Racial Contradictions of Neoliberalism', Grace Hong and I argue for an extension of the definition of neoliberalism 'as the current stage of racial capital that emerged after the worldwide liberation movements of the mid-twentieth century, what Elizabeth Povinelli (2011) describes as "the governance of social difference in the wake of anticolonial movements and the emergence of new social movements"'.⁷

Similar to neocolonialism, neoliberalism represents a cannibalistic response to insurgent struggles. As I argued in *The Reorder of Things*,

National liberation, civil rights, and neocolonialism should be understood as part of a larger social context that proclaimed the command of a new mode of power, a mode that was composed of power's new techniques of management, especially around internationalism and

minority difference, as well as its insinuation into political agency.⁸

Neoliberalism and neocolonialism would thus become mechanisms for resuscitating and regenerating colonial and liberal inequalities rather than annihilating them.

As neocolonialism and neoliberalism have expressed themselves by claiming certain articulations of insurgent struggles and minority difference – articulations reconciled to the needs of global capital – they have revealed how flexible local and minority differences are, that they can – in a paraphrase of Stuart Hall's classic essay 'The Local and the Global' – 'live with', be overcome by, and incorporated through global capitalism.⁹ That flexibility also brought the question of what form of emancipation will yield real and broad emancipation into stark relief. In a 1959 address, Aimé Césaire got at this question through the competing forms of decolonisation at work in the anti-colonial and post-colonial contexts. He wrote,

But in the end I say, and I maintain, that inside decolonization itself there are degrees, that all forms of decolonization are not equal, and if a 'good decolonization' can only be defined by a contrast with a 'less good decolonization' I would say that the latter is one which within the framework of independence, only thinks of utilizing the old colonial structures by adapting them to the new realities, whereas the true decolonization is the one which realizes it is its duty to shatter the colonial structures in definitive fashion.¹⁰

In the passage, we can see that Césaire attempts to parse the forms of decolonisation in ways not dissimilar to Marx's parsing of emancipation in 'On the Jewish Question'. There's a 'good decolonization' versus a 'less good decolonization' for Césaire and a human emancipation versus a political emancipation for Marx.

Ironically, one of the places where this kind of decolonisation took place in the US was not only in the Black Power movement but also the civil rights movement. When Martin Luther King gave his 'Trumpet of Conscience' speech against the Vietnam War in 1967, he critiqued the political ideology of bourgeois moderation. He said,

It is difficult to exaggerate the creative contributions of young Negroes. They took nonviolent resistance, first employed in Montgomery, Alabama in mass dimensions,

and developed original forms of application – sit-ins, freedom rides, and wade-ins. To accomplish these, they first transformed themselves. Young negroes had traditionally imitated whites in dress, conduct, and thought in a rigid, middle-class pattern. Gunnar Myrdal described them as exaggerated Americans. Now they ceased imitating and began initiating. Leadership passed into the hands of Negroes, and their white allies began learning from them. This was a revolutionary and wholesome development for both. It is ironic that today so many educators and sociologists are seeking to instill middle-class values in Negro youth as the ideal in social development. It was precisely when young Negroes threw off their middle-class values that they made an historic social contribution.¹¹



For King, bourgeois ideology – whether by the white bourgeoisie or the Black one – was a commitment to the status quo. The moment that young Black people – en masse – rejected it is the moment that they ushered in historic change. This is a searing critique of respectability politics and of the bourgeois classes; King is in fact saying that the civil rights movement was a historic repudiation of respectability politics as well as bourgeois ideals and that there would have been no movement had that not been the case. The implication here is that the Black bourgeoisie can in no way be the author and finisher of Black freedom struggles.

In his classic book *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1820-1925*, Wilson Jeremiah Moses also touched on the Black bourgeoisie as an agentive formation, one whose agency was part of its entrenchment in social reproduction. Of those nineteenth-century formations, he argued,

The middle class Negroes would remain victims of prejudice, so long as the masses remained untutored, impoverished, and demoralized. The goal of uplifting freedmen was similar to the goal of uplifting Africa, and was to be carried on for the same purposes as the old antebellum African civilizationism. The building of Afro-American culture would demonstrate to all the world that blacks were able and willing to make a contribution to American life, and were, therefore, fit to be United States citizens. As the masses were elevated, the bourgeoisie would rise correspondingly.¹²

Here Moses makes clear that the African American bourgeoisie was an agent of social reproduction but not just the reproduction of a national order pertaining to the U.S. but a civilisational order concerning the status of the colonial project in Africa.

W.E.B. Du Bois's notion of the talented tenth expressed a belief in the agency of the Black bourgeoisie. As he wrote,

The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men. The problem of education, then, among Negroes must first of all deal with the Talented Tenth; it is the problem of developing the Best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst, in their own and other races.¹³

By the 1930s, Du Bois had begun to reconsider his beliefs about the Black bourgeoisie. Referring to Du Bois's Rosenwald lecture of 1933, Cedric Robinson argued: 'Du Bois was addressing himself directly to the problem of the alienation of the black elite from the black masses'. In Du Bois, we find someone who began with a faith in the coalitional impulses of the Black elite toward the Black poor but who ended in disillusionment about both those impulses.¹⁴

Feminist and queer components of the Black radical tradition have powerfully demonstrated the failure of the Black bourgeoisie to coalesce with their poor and working-class counterparts across class as well as gender, nation and sexuality. Consider, for instance, M. Jacqui Alexander's contention in her classic 1997 chapter 'Erotic

Autonomy as a Politics of Decolonization: An Anatomy of Feminist and State Practice in the Bahamas Tourist Economy' in the book that she co-edited with Chandra Mohanty – *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies and Democratic Futures*. In it, Alexander identified heteropatriarchal law as a carry-over from the colonial period, writing, 'there are certain functions of heteropatriarchy which supersede the sexual or marking of sexual difference. At this historical moment, for instance, heteropatriarchy is useful in continuing to perpetuate a colonial inheritance ... and in enabling the political and economic processes of recolonization'.¹⁵ We can read Alexander's essay as an extension of Césaire's argument that all decolonisations are not created equal. For instance, as she argued,

While the Black Nationalist Party (The People's Liberal Party) wrested power from an elite group of white powers in 1972, which was formerly influential in the colonial legislature, it seized ownership of some of the more popular symbols of Black working-class political struggle, like the Burma Road Rebellion, and claimed the right of women to vote (initiated in 1962) as its own benevolent achievement. This would mark its first attempt to erase the memory of popular struggle. It narrowed its own vision of popular nationalism, turning the mobilization of women, youth, trade unions and churches on which it relied for support into a constitutional convention, organized in Britain, in which the Queen was retained as head of State.¹⁶

The Black Nationalist Party, which would become The People's Liberal Party, would narrow the visions of grassroots and feminist movements to fit within the ideals of the new postcolonial state. In doing so, The Black Nationalist Party would attempt to close the political universes imagined by grassroots and feminist movements and adopt the postures of political versus human emancipation.

Cedric Robinson described the Black bourgeoisie in *Black Marxism* as 'a broker stratum seemingly secured from above by a ruling class that proffered them increments of privilege while ruthlessly repressing mass black mobilization'.¹⁷ We may read Alexander's observations as an adjustment of Robinson's in that ruthlessly repressing mass Black mobilisation was concomitant with the repression of gender and sexual freedom. Even as national liberation movements contested the racial and class exploitations of liberal capitalist states, those movements would retreat from the ways in which those exploita-

tions depended upon gender and sexual regulations. This proved devastating in a moment in which global capital during the 1970s and onwards was producing the conditions for transgressions and regulations along the lines of gender, sexuality and race as seen in the feminisation of immigrant and service labour as well as the reassertion of heteropatriarchal controls through the state. More pointedly, minority bourgeoisies would emerge as the supervisors of gender and sexual normativity in that historical context, making bourgeois privilege a proxy for gender and sexual normativity. These processes could be seen in a variety of contexts – through the emergence of neocolonial bourgeoisies in the Caribbean, managing forms of sexuality in the context of Western tourism; or through the rise of an African American bourgeoisie, supervising healthcare for poor, drug-addicted, and HIV-positive Black people; or through the emergence of diasporic communities from the global south, managing cultural events to exclude LGBTQ+ people from those same diasporic communities.¹⁸

A historical, comparative and transnational approach to bourgeois formations means assessing the ways that they claim to fulfil the terms of emancipation while fulfilling the existing social order, doing so across racial, gender, sexual and national identities. It is also a means linking the rise and regulation of social movements across global terrains to one another. Moreover, it also means developing modes of scrutiny that can distinguish between different forms of emancipation and their relationships to state and capital.

Part of that geopolitical task means unpacking bourgeois formations then and now. I have always been intrigued by the seductions that have coaxed Black bourgeois formations into being – seductions that offer not just personal distinctions, but exclusive forms of agency withheld from everyday Black people. For Alexander, it's the capacity of Black bourgeois formations in the Caribbean to express gender and sexual normativity. It's also the ability to shape and often wither the meanings of Black popular and working-class struggles to buttress the nation state. Another signature capacity has been the assumption of a comprador role between the nation state and the minoritised.

The emergence of an LGBTQ bourgeoisie represents a similar moment of danger where insurgent and coalitional struggles are concerned. In an essay entitled

‘Stonewall was a Riot. Now we Need a Revolution’, the Asian American activist and writer Merle Woo takes sharp aim at that bourgeoisie. Discussing gay moderate responses to the anti-gay crusades of Anita Bryant, Woo writes,

Gay moderates had tried to counter the hysteria of Bryant’s crusade with public information campaigns that emphasized privacy rights, downplayed or didn’t even mention homosexuality, and ignored the far right’s ongoing mobilization against all civil rights gains. These timid reformists scorned alliances with other oppressed groups and insisted that outspoken opposition to anti-gay initiative campaigns would spark a backlash. They betrayed gay rights, as they have betrayed people of color, workers and women – as if there are no gays among these groups.

In the mid-’80s, one gay San Francisco Supervisor refused to fight for immigrant rights while he campaigned for gay rights legislation, saying, ‘I don’t want to hitch my wagon to a losing star’. As if there are no queer immigrants. Last year, the Human Rights Commission refused to add transgender rights (‘gender identity’) to the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA) because we’re supposed to accept liberation in stages.¹⁹

Woo addresses how a gay bourgeoisie narrowed an LGBTQ political platform into a single-issue politics and in doing so undermined a coalitional politics that would have supported other minoritised groups. Woo’s caution resonates with Reagon’s admonitions. In her speech, she argued: ‘The thing that must survive you is not the record of your practice, but the principles that are the basis of your practice’.²⁰ Coalitions, she said, are ways of holding those principles in awareness. Coalitions, also mean striving to be something other than the inheritors of the bourgeois legacies that capital, the state and the academy intend for us.

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Notes

1. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, ed., *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017), 62.
2. Karl Marx, ‘On the Jewish Question’, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton and

Company, 1978), 32.

3. Kwame Nkrumah, *Neocolonialism* (Bedford: Panaf Books, 1970) 239.

4. Aimé Césaire, ‘The Man of Culture and His Responsibilities’, *Présence Africaine: Cultural Journal of the Negro World* 24-25 (1959), 128.

5. Ibid.

6. Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), 42.

7. Roderick A. Ferguson and Grace Hong, ‘The Sexual and Racial Contradictions of Neoliberalism’, *Journal of Homosexuality* 59:7, 1057.

8. Roderick A. Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things: The University and its Pedagogies of Minority Difference* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 25.

9. Stuart Hall, ‘The Local and the Global’, in *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*, eds. Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti and Ella Shohat (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 183.

10. Césaire, ‘The Man of Culture’, 128.

11. Martin Luther King, Jr., ‘Trumpet of Conscience’, in James M. Washington, ed., *The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Harper Collins, 1986), 645.

12. Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850-1925* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 71.

13. See <https://glc.yale.edu/talented-tenth-excerpts>.

14. Indeed, we can read Du Bois’s 1935 text *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* as an expression of this shift towards appreciating the Black poor as historical agents.

15. M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory and the Sacred* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 24.

16. Ibid, 25.

17. Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 191.

18. For further discussion, see the conclusion to *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

19. Merle Woo, ‘Stonewall was a Riot – Now We Need a Revolution’, in Tommi Avicelli Mecca, ed., *Smash the Church, Smash the State! The Early Years of Gay Liberation* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2009), 287.

20. Bernice Johnson Reagon, ‘Coalition Politics: Turning the Century’, in Barbara Smith, ed., *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (New York: Kitchen Table, 1983), 366.