

Modern Allyship and Radical Organizing

Definitions

Ally: Following the popularity of Black human rights activism following 2020, BKC defines an ally as an individual with privilege who *theoretically* aligns with the mission and efforts of a marginalized group seeking liberation from oppressive institutions, but upholds characteristics of these institutions to protect their individual power or identity.

In-group/Out-group: An in-group/out-group relationship is used to describe relationships between powerful and marginalized groups in society. Within Western society, the ingroup is white people and the outgroup(s) is anyone who is not white and whose conditions are a result of white supremacy. An ingroup always holds the most structural power.

Racial colorblindness: The choice not to apply someone's racial identity to how they are treated, their conditions, or their personhood, and only view them as a person.

Social currency: A metaphorical societal value/approval assigned to a person's behaviors and characteristics. People may adopt a certain behavior because it is popular and will afford them positive social currency.

The white subconscious: Based on literature by Malcolm X and James Baldwin, the white subconscious is the collective mindset of white Americans and their attitudes/beliefs about racism and white supremacy. It explains actions such as microaggressions or unconscious prejudices.

Allyship in the 21st Century

In a capitalist society, everything has a way to be made for profit. The incentive for profit leads to *commodification*, where an item, idea, or even a person, is mass produced to be sold. Starting in 2015 after the creation of Black Lives Matter, the human rights abuses of Black people and people of color became commodified, and the radical framework of the mission diluted.

The commodification of Black struggle made way for the popularization of what it means to stand against the systems that oppress Black people, also known as being an ally. Allyship takes many forms, but the most common one is one of minimum action. With the growth of social media and activism, in-group members have taken on the role of ally as a form of social currency.

In social movements before the rapid growth of online activism, an ally would be on the frontlines of protests facing state police, advocating in their own in-groups for better conditions of the out-group, and were willing to sacrifice their identity with the in-group for others' rights. Now, allyship has been reduced to small actions that do not demand any sacrifice, and instead bolster one's social currency. These include:

- Posting + reposting content relating to social issues online
- Signing an online petition created by members of the out-group
- Attending large marches with low risk of state violence
- Purchasing merchandise from large companies with designs relating to social issues

What each of these actions have in common is that they require minimum action and no real sacrifice or discomfort. They allow an ally to show visible support for the fight of oppressed people (generating social currency), without sacrificing any comfort or status awarded with being a part of the in-group.

Realities of modern allyship

Black radical scholars and organizers have warned those invested in the liberation of all oppressed people against what Malcolm X described as the white subconscious. The white subconscious is what allows in-group members to distance themselves from the possibility of sacrificing their identity for the betterment of marginalized groups. Much of this is due to an unfamiliarity with the full truth of white history, and how deeply rooted and expansive white supremacy is.

White people “are, in effect, still trapped in a history which they do not understand; and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it. They have had to believe for many years, and for innumerable reasons, that black men are inferior to white men.” James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (1963).

The white subconscious makes it difficult to have a critical understanding of white supremacy's history, or its role in creating oppressive conditions for Black people and people of color. An ally's actions cannot be certified as free from self-interest without this critical understanding. Self-

interested allyship leads to the actions listed above, but can also result in visibly positioning oneself in organizing spaces reserved for members of the out-group.

When white allies invite themselves to environments created for out-group members to build capacity and organize against the system that designed their conditions (and that allies benefit from), it can lead to a handful of outcomes:

- Consistently explaining experiences, language, or histories that are automatically understood among the out-group to allies
- Censoring the content of discussions for the comfort of allies
- Allies feeling compelled to “prove” their commitment in theatrical and unnatural ways
- Overtime, seeing greater number of in-group allies than oppressed out-group members in the space
- Diluting radical traditions to a more liberal standard

Looking for comrades

The modern evolution of an ally demands seeking a new type of in-group/out-group allegiance, and that is the comrade. In the context of in-groups and out-groups, a *comrade* is an individual with privilege who disidentifies with their in-group and sacrifices individual power to weaponize their identity against oppressive systems. Simply put, a comrade is someone who is in the fight alongside marginalized people—they understand the nuanced history that created the current conditions and what systems/societal norms currently uphold them. A comrade:

- Sacrifices the comfort of in-group identity to push forward Black and POC organizing
- Acts in service of the out-group, not as a guiding force for their work
- Leverage their privilege to supply financial resources for the out-group
- Do not exercise racial colorblindness, and views racial and cultural difference as an organizing strength instead of a social taboo
- Actively holds other in-group members accountable for their complacency in upholding oppressive systems
- Has a critical understanding of whiteness, its history, and the violence it exerts

In looking ahead at achieving collective liberation from the current conditions, organizers must seek out comrades. Because allyship has become commodified and taken over by the in-group, radically grounded people should reject this standard of in-group involvement. More must be demanded of people with institutionalized power who wish to engage in the human rights issues of Black people and people of color. Commodification of oppression has created a bare minimum standard for allyship that helps maintain the conditions being fought against. Allies are not in the best interest of Black liberation—comrades are.

Exploratory Questions

1. How does the white subconscious interact with the way social and political institutions view racism?
2. What is the relationship between commodification and dehumanization?
3. In what way can the white subconscious be dismantled? Whose responsibility is it to start?

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