

Conference Report on “Solidarity in Times of Crisis”

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Conference Report on “Solidarity in Times of Crisis”

December 3-4, 2020, Giessen, Germany

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The topic of solidarity could hardly have been timelier, although the organizers could not have known that when they settled on a seemingly old-fashioned term from the political vocabulary. On December 3rd and 4th, 2020, with the still ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the Graduate Center for Social Sciences, Business, Economics and Law (GGS) of the University of Giessen put the notion of solidarity at the center of its annual conference. In addition to the global pandemic, the term was considered in light of political emancipatory struggles: the refugee crisis, the Black Lives Matter movement, and global protests. Led by REGINA KREIDE (Giessen), JEANETTE EHRMANN (Giessen/ Koblenz-Landau) and HANNES KAUFMANN (Giessen), the study group “Human Rights and Democracy” brought together scholars from Europe, Africa, and North America to discuss both the conceptual dimensions and practices of solidarity. Solidarity remains academically ill defined, while clearly growing in significance in the public discourse; taken together, the conference advanced urgently needed research on this politically prominent notion.

The first panel of Day 1 was opened by RAHEL JAEGGI (Berlin) elaborating a theoretical approach to solidarity. Without being exhaustive, Jaeggi posited that it must represent a social bond, irreducible to the individual. It acts as a specific, impersonal relation, since an affective relationship is not one of solidarity. Hierarchical structures demanding loyalty, like the mafia, are also not examples of solidarity; it must have a reciprocal aspect that also excludes the asymmetrical practice of charity. Further, solidarity includes mediation by a common cause and is different from a mere coalition of interests, as it transcends narrow individual concern. Jaeggi also presented some obstacles in understanding the concept of solidarity: asymmetry among those in solidarity with one another, due to unequal starting positions. To avoid an all-too-narrow particularism on one hand, and empty universalism on the other, Jaeggi posited the concept of ‘emergent universalism.’

Following Jaeggi, GADA MAHROUSE (Montréal) picked up the problem of asymmetry in solidary relations, speaking of the role and problems of white allyship in antiracist struggles. Mahrouse looked at how white allies can leverage their privilege to advance the racial equality struggle. Drawing parallels between ongoing Black Lives Matter activism and the Civil Rights Struggle in the 1960s, Mahrouse sought to extract lessons for social justice. Significantly, although the Civil Rights Movement was able to mobilize large numbers of white youth, it was not free of racial tensions. Even well-intentioned white people sought to take leadership of the struggle. At the point of impasse, the slogan Black leaders deployed was ‘get out of the way.’ Importantly, Mahrouse insists that ‘getting out of the way’ does not mean disengage, but rather, an invitation to find other ways to leverage white allyship in advancing the Black Lives Matter movement.

In the third presentation of the first panel, ULF TRANOW (Düsseldorf) looked at the concept of solidarity through an analytic and normative lens. Solidarity is a ‘fuzzy’ concept, meaning different things in different disciplines, yet it requires an absence of compensation and has a practical dimension. Rather than elaborating it further as a concept, Tranow approached the problem by asking: What is solidarity good for? He gave four norms comprising the core of the concept: 1) collective good; 2) sharing; 3) consideration of need; 4) loyalty. The four norms determine the social demarcation of solidarity: the ‘we’ of the solidary group. Tranow, however, pointed to a potential exclusionary function of solidarity, in its ties to a welfare state, which has historically meant excluding non-citizens.

“Solidarity and Knowledge” by AMY NIANG (Johannesburg) opened the second panel. Expert on northern African countries, for Niang solidarity evokes the 1955 Bandung Conference. Since that time, however, colonialism has shifted from a primarily military threat to a social and economic one, resulting in current migrations across North Africa towards Europe. This new colonialism creates a stark contrast between opulence for few and destitution for many. Although the situation can possibly be remedied through solidarity, it too is blocked by this globalized system. For Niang, therefore, solidarity is less a matter of knowledge of the concept, and more a question of practice: how can we overcome a globalized capitalist system in order to be able to show solidarity with those in need?

DAVID ÁLVAREZ (Vigo) followed Niang, and he looked at asymmetrical relations within social movements. A hypothetical reciprocity of common interests is necessary to overcome asymmetry. ‘Speech acts’ are crucial as a form of strategic communication, and Álvarez claims there are three types: 1) identity claims – a group stating what it is; 2) standing statements – positioning in relation to other groups; and 3) programmatic points – antagonistic relation towards political power. These are further supported by resorting to a combination of *worthiness, unity, number, and commitment*. For Álvarez, solidarity can operate within or among groups, if motivated by ethics. The latter, asymmetrical solidarity, is more interesting, as it goes beyond one’s own civic duty to a community of strangers. Asymmetrical solidarity is one presupposition of democratic solidarity within social movements.

Ending the second panel, JARED HOLLEY (Berlin) brought a historical anti-colonial perspective to solidarity. Entitled ‘Recovering Anti-Colonial Roots of Solidarity,’ he sought alternatives to Léon Bourgeois’ colonialist and Eurocentric conception of solidarity. Holley finds them in Anténor Firmin (and in the Cuban poet José Martí and the American sociologist W. E. B. DuBois) who formulated a more inclusive and anti-colonial concept of solidarity. These authors explored a cross-racial, cross-linguistic form of solidarity in Latin America. Holley concluded by saying that going forward, solidarity needs to be anti-colonial, necessitating reworking its genealogy back past Léon Bourgeois and towards Anténor Firmin.

The conference’s first day ended with a keynote speech, entitled “Protest, Silencing, and Solidarity,” by JOSÉ MEDINA (Evanston). Medina explored the concept of solidarity through practices of protest – how solidarity is expressed; and silencing – how it goes missing. Just as there are many ways of protesting, there are many different ways of showing solidarity. Thus, Medina says, solidarity is polyphonic in the sense that an exploration of solidarity, in the concrete, yields an array of potential activist practices. Accordingly, it is contextual and takes different shapes within one social struggle. More importantly, Medina sees solidarity not as all or nothing, but as broad-ranging and graded, asking “how deep does your solidarity go?” He differentiated between thin and thick solidarity, as well as between internal (in-group) and external (out-group) solidarity.

Building on the moral premise of the existence of an obligation to resist injustice, Medina continued to form an argument against complicity, that is, an absence of solidarity: the

obligation to resist injustice implies a collective duty to protest. He differentiates between passive complicity marked by silence and inaction, and active complicity, notable in speech and action, e.g., depicting legitimate protests as meaningless or violent riots. Just as important is to note the many forms of silencing, i.e., roadblocks to solidarity. Medina mapped out four different types of silencing: (1) prelocutionary: even before speech – banning protest, intimidating protesters; (2) illocutionary – misrepresenting legitimate protests; (3) elocutionary – systematic distortion of protest voices; and (4) perlocutionary silencing – ensuring protests have no transformative power, reducing them to media spectacles. Resisting the silencing of protest – proactively fighting silencing, active listening of protesting voices – in each of these four categories is a crucial part of the duty against injustice. Otherwise, one becomes a passive bystander or even an active silencer of protest. Concluding, Medina underscored that solidarity with legitimate protest, while polyphonic, is a normative requirement and a robust obligation.

On day two, ROBIN CELIKATES (Berlin) also considered the asymmetric power relations solidarity entails. He argued against migrants having to ‘integrate,’ or adopt ‘our’ values. Rather, deploying the perspective of radical democracy, Celikates claimed that ‘real’ solidarity is always challenged by constitutive tensions and undermines the naturalized distinctions among cultures. To the question whether solidarity can exist in asymmetric structures, Celikates argued that although solidarity aims for equality, it often falls short (e.g., humanitarian interventions). Constant vigilance is required not to reproduce power asymmetries. Drawing on Étienne Balibar and James Ingram, he called for a cosmopolitics ‘from below,’ challenging the exclusionary and exploitative categories of membership that currently dominate public discourse.

VERONIKA ZABLOTSKY (Los Angeles) dovetailed on Celikates, asking, what does solidarity look like to migration and critical border scholars? Drawing on Pezzani and Heller’s “disobedient gaze” and Abrego’s “research as accompaniment,” she argues for the necessity of reflection on power difference between researcher and ‘object,’ insisting that epistemic authority lies with marginalized groups. Furthermore, scholars must think critically about how the knowledge produced is used by neo-colonial border regimes and how it can repurposed to further social justice. For Zablotzky, “political action need not be compelled by necessity,” but

should be a decision to act ethically and seek mutual relationships with migrants and refugees.

ANDREAS BUSEN (Hamburg) approached solidarity by asking how we could describe it as a social practice. To be more than mere support, acts of solidarity must have public visibility. This position sparked a lively discussion on whether non-public acts can be solidary. Busen's perspective helped widen the scope of thinking about solidarity, looking at the possible effects solidary acts can have on audiences. For Busen, solidarity is political, but it is also public. Therefore, it would be a mistake to neglect how these practices represent a certain view on the current crisis and how they might even alter the dominant narrative. Furthermore, it is worth looking at the audience reaction to performances: how it perceives the claims presented and whether it becomes motivated to action.

For the second panel, SEBASTIAN GARBE (Giessen) opened "decolonial perspectives on transnational advocacy of and with the Mapuche," an indigenous people in Latin America making up 10% of Chile's population. Between 2014 and 2017, Garbe looked at transnational advocacy movements among and for the Mapuche, and was able to identify a repertoire of mobilization and protest strategies. He mapped four types of critical solidarity practices, which he characterized as "ecological cosmopolitanism from below:" *compromiso* (engaging with struggle on a long-term basis), *compartir* (practice of exchanging gifts and sharing time), *keyuwvn* (mutual support) and *mingako* (working together). Garbe concluded that solidarity from a decolonial perspective has to aim for autonomy and agency that can weave international, reciprocal, durable, and ethical practices.

With her presentation, Jeanette Ehrmann (Giessen) sought to "unsettle the coloniality of democracy." She drew on postcolonial theory to understand the problem of democracy under enduring colonialism, in which selective solidarity is inevitable. The causes of this are the Westphalian fiction of nation-states as autonomous and independent; that Western models of modernity are inherently colonial and racialized; and that their goal is the "imperative to secure the well-being of our present ethno-class." The result are lives sacrificed to our Western liberal "community of equals." Ehrmann's case study are Eastern European meat packers at Tönnies factories in Germany. Although their dwelling conditions are inhumane, their work during the COVID-19 pandemic ensures affordable food for Western European

consumers. They are, according to Ehrmann, in a state of “inclusive exclusion.” Colonial patterns of power thus work against democracy and against solidarity, and as long as they persist, solidarity will be continually undermined through racialized and colonial practices.

Last in the panel, MANUELA BOATCĂ (Freiburg) reinforced Ehrmann’s presentation by elaborating on another example of double standards within the European Union (EU). While celebrating its “Seventy Years of Solidarity” (official EU poster), it allows appalling conditions of industrial meat production. Starkly illustrating the EU’s double standard during the COVID-19 pandemic, Boatcă cited the 15-million-Euro program of repatriation of EU citizens vacationing abroad, while at the same time bringing in 80,000 workers for the harvest – to maintain the “well-being of the ethno-class.” Boatcă concluded by underlining that as long as the political economy is antagonistic to solidarity, the latter will be undermined, as the ethno-class’ privileges will be valued more highly.

The conference ended with a truly transnational roundtable discussion that once again took up the concrete perspectives of solidarity movements around the world. MEGAN FRANCIS (Seattle) gave an update on the development of the Black Lives Matter movement in the US. By drawing historical comparisons, she insisted that solidarity necessarily depends on learning one’s own history and awareness of one’s tradition. She seemed rather pessimistic regarding police reform, while at the same time asking allies to “use their privilege to end their privilege.”

BEATA KOWALSKA (Krakow) introduced the Polish struggle surrounding reproductive rights into the discussion, mentioning the slogan “Polish Women against the Pandemic Patriarchy.” Just like Francis before her, she insisted on the important function of former social movements such as *Solidarność*. Even more precarious might be the situation in Turkey, as presented by VOLKAN CIDAM (Istanbul). In light of ongoing persecution of academics by the Erdoğan regime, as well as three million Syrian refugees in the country. Cıdam advocated for the establishment and strengthening of transnational networks.

Regina Kreide closed by summarizing and synthesizing some of the points made. In general, solidarity cannot be impartial; it has to be for and against something. Therefore, it has the contradictory nature of being exclusive while at the same time aiming at inclusivity. Similarly

to José Medina and other speakers, Kreide sees a duty to struggle, which she frames as the struggle for “unreachable universalism.” Solidarity is always political because it refers to concrete injustices, and at the same time is about the transformation of bad institutions.

The concluding discussion revolved around concrete movements and their strategies. Historical struggles, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and Solidarność, forerunners of solidarity movements, were critically honored, and their transnational dimension praised. Issues of racial justice but also women’s strikes in several Latin American countries were identified as examples of successful transnational solidarity. Thus, one of the main conclusions drawn at the end was that problems of solidarity could not be solved theoretically; rather, scholars have a duty to be engaged in joint collective political initiatives.

The different perspectives presented at the conference show that research on solidarity has a long-established tradition shaped by different scientific contexts. Each panel discussion illustrated a wide range of topics bound up within solidarity. Several speakers brought up the question of asymmetry among agents and recipients of solidarity, whether it was possible across hierarchies, different positions, interests, nationalities, etc. The participants were also lucid about the potential problem of particularity and universality, and the task of overcoming this duality. A number of times over the two days, solidarity was explicitly differentiated from charity and the issue of allyship was interrogated. Panelists were keenly aware that solidarity has assumed a new significance with the global COVID-19 pandemic, which arrived at the end of a number of years marked by unprecedented migratory trends. Ultimately, however, the questions presented remain open for further research, indeed, considering current political, environmental, and social issues, research on solidarity is increasingly urgent. It is important to remember that the notion of solidarity (also) entails a strong critique of the idea of the dispassionate and disengaged researcher, which has direct consequences for the work of academics and how they generate and apply their knowledge. Future theoretical conclusions could be further and more strongly buttressed by activist accounts and perspectives of the vulnerable, who practice solidarity every day.

Program

Thursday, December 3, 2020

Dimensions of Solidarity

Rahel Jaeggi (Humboldt University, Berlin): "Transforming Solidarities"

Gada Mahrouse (Concordia University, Montréal): "The Role of White Allies in Antiracism Solidarity"

Ulf Tranow (Heinrich Heine University, Düsseldorf): "Solidarity as an Analytical and Normative Concept"

Amy Niang (University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg): "Solidarity and Knowledge"

David Álvarez (University of Vigo, Vigo): "Coalescing Subjects: Social Movements and Asymmetrical Conditions in the Public Sphere"

Jared Holley (Free University, Berlin): "Recovering the Anti-Colonial Roots of Solidarity"

Keynote Lecture

José Medina (Northwestern University, Evanston): "Protest, Silencing, and Solidarity"

Friday, December 4, 2020

Practices of Solidarity

Robin Celikates (Free University, Berlin): "Against Integration. Solidarity 'from below' and Migrant Practices of Critique"

Veronika Zablotsky (University of California, Los Angeles): "Solidarity and Research Ethic"

Andreas Busen (Heinrich Heine University, Düsseldorf): "Performing Solidarity"

Sebastian Garbe (Justus Liebig University, Giessen): "Weaving Solidarity – Decolonial Perspectives on Transnational Advocacy of and with the Mapuche"

Jeanette Ehrmann (Justus Liebig University, Giessen): “Selective Solidarity: Unsettling the Coloniality of Democracy”

Manuel Boatcă (Albert Ludwigs University, Freiburg): “The Solidarity Fund vs. The Currency of Abuse: EU Responses to Crisis”

Roundtable Discussion “We’re All In This Together? Solidarity in Pandemic Times”

Megan Ming Francis (University of Washington, Seattle)

Beata Kowalska (Jagiellonian University, Kraków)

Volkan Çıdam (Boğaziçi University, Istanbul/Humboldt University, Berlin)

Regina Kreide (Justus Liebig University, Giessen)