

## Conference Report on “Anticolonial Solidarity: Political Theory and Global History in Dialogue”

A workshop at SCRIPTS/FU Berlin, 15–16 July 2021

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## Conference Report on “Anticolonial Solidarity: Political Theory and Global History in Dialogue”

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What is anticolonial solidarity? This question brought together political theorists and global historians for the online workshop “Anticolonial Solidarity: Political Theory and Global History in Dialogue” on July 15th and 16th, 2021. Organized by JARED HOLLEY (Freie Universität Berlin), the workshop intended to deepen the academic dialogue about the transnational past and present of practices and theories of anticolonial solidarity. The orienting question is important. Appeals to ‘solidarity’ proliferate among politicians and public health officials seeking to legitimate otherwise unpopular mobility restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic. But their pictures of solidarity — in elite frameworks of nationalist-communitarianism or liberal-internationalism — contrast sharply with ways of seeing solidarity typical of transnational anticolonial movements. In order to counter the hegemonic perspective on solidarity, the goal of the workshop was to uncover and discuss the vibrant history and present of more radical, transformative practices of anticolonial solidarity. In pursuing that objective, the presenters approached their research questions by thinking about both solidarity and anticolonialism together, and by reflecting on the importance of histories of freedom, oppression, and resistance in the formation of contemporary solidarities. By so doing, two important limits of current approaches to solidarity were addressed: First, theoretical accounts of solidarity are *insufficiently historical*. Second, both the theoretical and historical literatures on solidarity are *insufficiently global*, but rather Euro-centric in their nature.

Tackling those shortcomings, the workshop was composed of five panels with ten historical and theoretical case studies from Europe, North America, South America, Asia and Africa. The interdisciplinary structure of the dialogue placed historical recovery and theoretical analysis of anticolonial solidarity in a relationship of reciprocal elucidation. Through this method, the

workshop broke new ground to capture ‘anticolonial solidarity’ as a discrete object of analysis in the global history of political thought.

JARED HOLLEY introduced the workshop as an invitation not to *define* anticolonial solidarity but, rather, to begin to recover and consider together some of its most important aspects. This matters, he argued, because the term ‘solidarity’ is today hardly ever put into a historical, let alone into a global historical context. More precisely, the predominating picture of solidarity “is largely framed by languages that *neglect* the history of colonialism, and by practices that *support* enduring structures of informal imperialism.” To oppose this narrative, Holley gave a small historical account on anticolonial solidarity. He did so by contrasting the Euro-centric vision of solidarity apparent in Émile Durkheim’s (1858–1917) book *The Division of Labor* (1893) with the anticolonial vision of the American Pan-Africanist W.E.B. Du Bois (1868–1963) and that of the Haitian statesman Anténor Firmin (1850–1911). Du Bois harshly criticized what he called the “solidarity of the West” (W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Negro Mind Reaches Out,” in *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, ed. Alain Locke, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992 [1925], 385–414, here: 395), which served to enlarge the hegemony of the White race to the detriment of colonized and marginalized people. In his crucial yet widely neglected *The Equality of the Human Races* (1885), Firmin had earlier denounced the Western colonial lust for expanding markets and an alleged promotion of civilization. In a text published the same year as the Berlin Africa Conference, he asked: “does not the question of race lie at the core of these outbursts of solidarity?” (Anténor Firmin, ed. Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban, transl. Asselin Charles, *The Equality of the Human Races*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press 2002 [1885], 387.)

MICHAEL GOEBEL (Graduate Institute of Geneva) opened the first panel “Nationalism and Popular Sovereignty” by asking whether anticolonial movements in the former French empire should be interpreted as a form of nationalism. He thereby nuanced the “revisionist historiography,” which sees the erection of nation-states as a contingent outcome of anticolonial movements and not as their incipient prime objective. In this sense, the “revisionist” historians (e.g. Fred Cooper) reject the previously predominant view of nationalism as *the* essential driving force in the decolonization process. Although Goebel partially agreed with their anti-teleological critique, he argued that the revisionists go too far in reducing the role of nationalism in anticolonial movements. Instead, Goebel suggested a

geographical distinction to highlight the diversity of anticolonial political visions. Whereas projects to establish transnational confederacies proliferated in the Caribbean and French Africa, for instance, the nation-state was always the political focus of anticolonial movements in Vietnam, Syria, or Lebanon. Moreover, Goebel reminded us that anticolonial leaders' choices about the alternative forms that postcolonial states might take were pragmatic and heavily context-dependent. With this change of perspective, Goebel posed a question that revisionist historians largely neglect: Why do we live in a world dominated by nation-states and not by other forms of political sovereignty?

INÉS VALDEZ (Ohio State University / LMU Munich) explored further post-colonial possibilities with "Anti-Imperial Popular Sovereignty: Martin Luther King, Frantz Fanon and the Possibility of Transnational Solidarity." The somewhat unlikely pairing of King's (1929–1968) critique of the Vietnam War with Fanon's (1925–1961) ideal of a post-colonial radical democracy allowed Valdez to reconstruct a tradition of popular sovereignty that criticizes hypocritical Western alliances with the respective elites in the developing world. As Valdez argued, King's 1967 speech "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence" opposed the centralized power structure controlled by hegemonic elites with a vision of transnational popular sovereignty. King argued that empire, racism, and capitalism make truly emancipatory democracies impossible and highlighted the destruction of popular sovereignty in oppressed parts of the world by American oligarchs. King called this the "brutal solidarity" (Martin Luther King, "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence," in *The Radical King*, ed. Cornel West, Boston: Beacon Press, 2015 [1967], 213) of the imperial elite, grounded in material self-interest and opposition to de-colonization. To oppose it, he called for a popular solidarity that would secure the freedom of subaltern peoples. The radical edge of King's call is clarified when viewed alongside Fanon's ideal of a post-colonial democracy: both, for Valdez, are oriented by opposition to capitalist exploitation of subaltern peoples by the hegemonic West. Moreover, the juxtaposition and ensuing interconnection of King's and Fanon's accounts provide a new, critical perspective on the multiple ways in which reactionary Western politics remain closely entwined with popular struggles in the Global South. King and Fanon both saw that radical spaces of contestation simultaneously entail claims of popular sovereignty and transnational anti-imperial solidarity. Revisiting them thus

reminds us of the potential for radically democratic and anti-elitist politics of solidarity across Western and non-Western spaces today.

NICOLE ABOITIZ (Clare Hall, Cambridge) opened the second panel on “Pan-Politics and Internationalism I” by tracing the Filipino nation’s transnational and cosmopolitan Asian intellectual foundations. Her goal was to reconnect Philippine history to that of Southeast and East Asia, from which it has been separated in historiography. Aboitiz argued that the turn-of-the-twentieth century Philippine Asianism, embodied by the *ilustrados* (educated elite), had a sustained effect on the concept of the Filipino nation. Their anticolonial discourse against the Spanish colonizers as well as their political mobilization in the First Philippine Republic were central to the emergence of Filipino nationalism. Aboitiz stressed the Pan-Asiatic perspective of the Filipino *ilustrados*. The leaders of the anticolonial movement in the Philippines intended to integrate Filipino nationalism into the wider Asian context, specifically the Malayan sphere. Aboitiz argued that nationalist periodicals like *La Solidaridad* strongly rejected any Sinic associations to portray Filipinos as belonging to the Malay race. The *ilustrados* hence saw race as an essentialized, hierarchized category, and harnessed their claimed ‘Malayness’ to legitimize their movement for an independent nation. This Pan-Asiatic orientation was instrumental in securing a transnational network of solidarity. This solidarity was largely understood in material terms of mutual aid, support, and association against Western power. But Aboitiz’s case study also raised the crucial but neglected issue of the *affective* dimensions of solidarity, as nationalist leaders like José Rizal (1861–1896) sought to awaken positive emotional bonds through extensive depictions of the natural beauty of the Philippines.

Following Aboitiz, GARY WILDER (CUNY Graduate Centre, New York) recalled Samir Amin’s (1931–2018) proposed transition from “a common front of the south” toward a “new internationalism of peoples.” As a renowned dependency theorist, the French-Egyptian economist Amin famously maintained that ‘Third World’ countries would never be able to pursue politics that would free them from Western economic and political domination. Global capitalism meant that periodic instances of South-South solidarity could never be made durable. The 1955 Bandung Conference was a symbolic achievement, but its goals needed to be transcended if genuine solidarity could be rescued from domination by nationalist-bourgeois elites. Following Lenin’s slogan to “transform the imperialist war into civil war,”

Amin envisioned a new counter-hegemonic solidarity that would exist both *between* and also, critically, *within* societies. *All* victims of the capitalist world order, including the majority populations of the Global North, must come to see its injustice. According to Amin, the North essentializes inequalities and creates disunity, both within the Global South and with oppressed people in the North. In this context, the internationalism of all peoples, North and South, would present a “humanist approach to worldwide apartheid” against inherited oppositions that, Wilder argued, continue to structure our political thinking. For that purpose, Amin intended to establish the ‘Fifth International’ with a radically democratic and internationalist character. Recalling his vision, Wilder concluded that a poly-centric world order “is the only solution to human salvation against neo-liberal capitalism” — and thus a “concrete utopianism” that remains a viable anticolonial alternative today.

The discussion of “Pan Politics and Internationalism” continued on Day 2, beginning with CEMIL AYDIN’s (University of North Carolina — Chapel Hill) reflections on “Pan-political Solidarities, 1870s–1940s: Possibilities, Practices and Shortcomings.” Aydin stressed the importance of the frequently neglected Pan-Asianism and Pan-Islamism as central movements in the history of anticolonial solidarity. In Aydin’s view, these projects achieved their objective of decolonization by delegitimizing European empires. The greatest achievement of early pan-nationalist thinkers like Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) or Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938) was their intellectual solidarity to “rescue humanity from European colonialism.” Nonetheless, it would be wrong to judge those pan-movements in Asia as genuinely anti-imperial, for their rhetoric could be and was used to preserve and expand non-European empires such as the Ottoman Empire. Even more importantly, the ability of Pan-Islamic and Pan-Asian movements to leverage the rights of weak groups against powerful elites has always been limited — their expressions of solidarity often undermined other practices of solidarity, or resulted in nation-states that were divisive to the original alliances of solidarity. Aydin’s account of the double-edged sword of intellectual solidarity in Pan-Islamic and Pan-Asian theory and practice thus raised a critical question: what might it mean to write global history or political theory in ways compatible with solidarity today?

CINDY EWING’s (University of Toronto) “Locating Worlds in Postcolonial Internationalism,” built upon Aydin by retracing the kinds of “worlds” imagined by national elites during the transition from the colonial to the postcolonial world. Ewing cautioned against the tendency

to “write history backwards” and promoted archival work to take seriously what people were actually saying in the 1940s and 1950s. This method provides new insights regarding the importance of South-South solidarity to post-colonial international cooperation, across projects like Afro-Asianism, the non-aligned movement, tri-continental solidarity, or Third Worldism. While all such movements turned away from the previous colonial metropole, they were still far from forming a homogenous group. Emerging conflicts were rooted in critical questions of how to put anticolonial solidarity into practice, with the tensions between “universality-particularity” or “homogeneity-pluralism” being especially generative. In the Asian context, the majoritarianism of such diverging political projects as Jawaharlal Nehru’s (1889–1964) idea of an ‘Eastern Federation’ and the idea of a ‘reunified’ South East Asia generated exclusions of large minorities. From this perspective, Ewing argued that geography should be central to thinking about anticolonial solidarity: Is a *globa*/transformation possible? Is there really only *one* world? How does geography limit solidarity? Ewing excavates heated debates about these questions in the “making” of the Third World after 1945. However, and crucially, those debates reveal that our usual distinctions between local, national, or global solidarity are far too simplistic, and should be rejected.

STACIE SWAIN (University of Victoria) opened the panel “Unsettling Solidarity” with a discussion of her practically-embedded political theorizing, “Engagements with Indigenous Resurgence as Anticolonial Solidarity.” Swain reflected on contemporary practices of anticolonial solidarity as instances of what indigenous resurgence scholars Glen Coulthard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson call “grounded normativity” (Glen Coulthard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, “Grounded Normativity / Place-Based Solidarity,” in *American Quarterly* 68.2 [2016], 249–255, [doi:10.1353/aq.2016.0038](https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2016.0038)): a “relational, place-based, and nation-specific framework from which to pursue Indigenous freedom.” As she explained, indigenous peoples in Canada often “invite” non-indigenous settlers to the place in question to stand with and act alongside them in anticolonial resistance. Swain joined several manifestations herself, for instance in Secwepemculecw at the Fraser River, where indigenous and non-indigenous solidarists protested against the TransCanada oil pipeline. Following Patrick Wolfe’s account of settler colonialism, Swain stressed that settler colonialism enacts a predatory economic system which destroys large territories, leading to ecological crisis. As the settler colonial regime is imperfect, the state governments always aim to maintain the

predatory relationships. The indigenous insurgents fight against this by de-centralizing the political decision process. In their view, every place is specific and should therefore have specific rights. Correspondingly, grounded normativity is a place-based and nation-specific form of the 'politics from below.' According to Swain, grounded normativity is hence an effective way of how anticolonial solidarity can work: it repudiates any international hegemonic concepts that conceive ideas for indigenous groups in a top-down way, and is instead marked by a deep understanding of the peculiarity of different locations and by a true solidarity with oppressed groups.

JARED HOLLEY's "Burn it all Down? Testing the Limits of Liberal Solidarity" continued the discussion of anticolonial solidarity with indigenous peoples in Canada. In lieu of a specific place-based "invitation" to indigenous territory, Holley joined a group of activists who massed outside the Canadian Embassy in Berlin in response to the "international call to solidarity" made by the Hereditary Chiefs of the Wet'suwet'en Nation. Using this demonstration to reflect on how transnational anticolonial solidarity could be theorized, Holley argued that the leading accounts of solidarity in liberal political theory are limited in different ways. In one view, solidarity is a special mode of joint action marked by a "symmetrical" disposition between actors to share fates or assume risks. On another, solidarity is a distinctively "asymmetrical" moral disposition, in which privileged agents defer to members of the oppressed groups they seek to join. In the Embassy example, the symmetry condition is misleading because the Hereditary Chiefs' and activists' dispositions to share fates with each other could never be genuinely symmetrical. Consequently, the activists could, by definition, not act in solidarity. However, the asymmetrical definition of solidarity, characterized by a "joiner in deference" is likewise problematic: the Wet'suwet'en explicitly "call" on joiners to exercise their local *autonomy* in building solidarity — an autonomy that the emphasis on *deference* denies them. The Embassy demonstration thus reveals the limits of liberal theoretical approaches to solidarity, which cannot fully grasp how anticolonial solidarity functions. In closing, Holley suggested that this limit ultimately stems from a neglect of existing practices of solidarity, and argued that overcoming the ascertained theoretical impasse requires an alternative account of anticolonial solidarity, which would reject any strong distinction between theory and practice.



The final panel continued the reflection on contemporary practice by turning to “Migrant Solidarities.” In “Towards a Genealogy of Migrant’s Struggles: The Alpine Migrant Passage and the Temporality of Solidarity,” MARTINA TAZZIOLI (Goldsmiths, London) used the example of a French-Italian border crossing in the Alps to discuss memories and practices of remembering solidarity. Her goal was to intertwine circulation across borders with a spatial approach of practice and political vocabulary. Thanks to her laborious archive work, Tazzioli managed to reconstruct the eventful history of migration on that particular border crossing close to Briançon, which from the 19th century until today continues to be a critical route for migrants through the Alps. Even more importantly, Tazzioli scrutinized the historical memory of the inhabitants living in the surrounding villages. She found that people on both sides of this politically relevant border have transmitted the memory of the migration history over generations, making the border crossing a veritable regional *lieu de mémoire*. Concluding her presentation, Tazzioli emphasized that the genealogy of solidarity is never linear, but depends very much on the circumstances and memories; and those, in turn, are shaped by prevailing power structures. Accordingly, there is no linear transmission of political memory, so that painstaking archival work is indispensable if one intends to retrace the history of solidarity on the ground. Tazzioli thus raised fundamental questions regarding the problematic temporal orientation of solidarity; for instance, whether and how anticolonial solidarity can be understood in developmentalist philosophies of history, or at the level of individual agency.

Dovetailing with Tazzioli, ROBIN CELIKATES (Freie Universität Berlin) drew on the example of the “summer of migration” in 2015 to argue that migrant practices of solidarity can play an active role in producing (rather than merely responding to) crises, as well as prefiguring emancipatory responses to them. Referring back to Du Bois’ critique of Western solidarity with which the workshop began, he emphasized that hegemonic theories and practices of solidarity are by their very nature highly exclusive in respect to gender, class, or race. Accordingly, attempts to include subaltern or marginalized peoples within this model can only produce a limited form of “pseudo-solidarity.” In contrast, Celikates presented three dimensions of migrant solidarity, which he considers an expression of a transformative, counter-hegemonic solidarity. First, migrant solidarity abolishes the border regime as a fundamental feature of the present state of things. Second, migrant solidarity challenges predominant forms of “white ignorance” in the Global North, by insisting on relations of

association that go beyond the hypocritical Western “pseudo-solidarity.” Finally, migrant solidarity points to a different political logic that questions how political belonging and solidarity are commonly imagined in terms of border and citizenship. Whereas migrants are routinely seen as coming “out of nowhere” in the Western political imaginary, their practices of critique reveal the extent to which migration is conditioned by oppressive political and economic global power structures. But migrant movements are also active, producing a radical, plural, and deterritorialized civil bond that transcends the bounded political community of statist imaginaries, both temporally and spatially. Migrants are thus creating new forms of solidarities that are non-elitist, counter-hegemonic and bottom-up. From Celikates’ perspective, then, migrant practices of solidarity open a range of ways of reconceiving anticolonial solidarity, in both theory and practice.

Attempting to make a first preliminary conclusion, let us turn back to the incipient question: What is anticolonial solidarity? While the workshop did not attempt to arrive at a clear-cut definition, it did provide many paths for a closer scrutiny of anticolonial solidarity. First, the workshop revealed the inadequacy of predominant views of solidarity, whether in the political imaginary or academic literature. Asking if migrants should be included in European welfare-state provisions, or whether solidarity should be seen as either a symmetrical joint action or as an asymmetrical moral disposition of deference, will not bring us much further in conceptualizing anticolonial solidarity. Instead, it will be a crucial endeavor in future conferences to theorize from the rough ground of political practice, and to center the *anticolonial* in any account of *solidarity*.

As the workshop made abundantly clear, anticolonial solidarity has not only a rich history but also a vital present. As Swain’s or Celikates’ presentations underscored, the oppression of people who are marginalized by the neo-imperial global world order has never abated. The overcoming of the oppressive global power structure requires solidarity for transnational action. There are obviously many heated debates on what shape those practices of counter-hegemonic solidarity should take. Presenters excavated several concepts that can assist in grasping these practices: grounded normativity, migrant solidarity, South-South solidarity, a Fifth International, continental solidarity (e.g. Pan-Africanism, Pan-Asianism), or religious solidarity (Pan-Islamism). In this sense, centering anticolonialism in a study of solidarity unsettles any easy distinction between past injustices and contemporary forms of domination.

In this respect, the inter-disciplinary dialogue between historians and political theorists proved to be an exceptionally promising means by which to analyze anticolonial solidarity. The global case-studies and examples of anticolonial solidarity offered by historians furnished ample empirical evidence of the relevant distinctions, characteristics, and limits of solidarity that concern political theorists. They also help to nuance those distinctions through testing the complicated practice of solidarity in the past. Indeed, a major outcome of the workshop is already to have recorded one crucial differentiation in our use of the language of “solidarity.” On one hand, there is the hegemonic, Western, white and Euro-centric solidarity familiar since Durkheim; on the other, there is the counter-hegemonic, non-elitist, bottom-up and transformative solidarity. It became apparent that this latter solidarity has a vibrant history, which, in contrast to the hegemonic accounts of solidarity, remains marginalized in today’s curriculum. Wrongly so, since there is a wide variety of scholars whose work might serve as a starting point for a deeper reading into historical accounts of anticolonial solidarity: Anténor Firmin, Muhammad Iqbal, W.E.B. Du Bois, Frantz Fanon, or Samir Amin — to name but a few. These and other thinkers covered in the workshop are most promising precisely because they are more interested in testing the limits of our understandings of solidarity than in setting new limits on them. And as the workshop clearly demonstrated, the most glaring limit of contemporary views is their neglect of anticolonialism.

## Program

Thursday, July 15, 2021

### **Nationalism & Popular Sovereignty**

Michael Goebel (Graduate Institute of Geneva): “Anticolonialism and Nationalism in the French Empire”

Inés Valdez ( Ohio State / LMU Munich): “Anti-Imperial Popular Sovereignty: Martin Luther King, Frantz Fanon and the Possibility of Transnational Solidarity”

### **Pan-Politics and Internationalism I**

Nicole CuUnjieng Aboitiz (Clare Hall, Cambridge): “Pan-Asian Solidarity and the Philippine Revolution”

Gary Wilder (CUNY Graduate Centre, New York): “From a Common Front of the South to a New Internationalism of Peoples: Recalling Samir Amin”

Friday, July 16, 2021

### **Pan Politics and Internationalism II**

Cemil Aydin (University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill): “Pan-political Solidarities, 1870s–1940s: Possibilities, Practices and Shortcomings”

Cindy Ewing (University of Toronto): “Locating Worlds in Postcolonial Internationalism”

### **Unsettling Solidarity**

Stacie Swain (University of Victoria): “Engagements with Indigenous Resurgence as Anticolonial Solidarity”

Jared Holley, (Free University, Berlin): “Burn It All Down? Testing the Limits of Liberal Solidarity”

### **Migrant Solidarities**

Martina Tazzioli (Goldsmiths, London): “Towards a Genealogy of Migrants’ Struggles: The Alpine Migrant Passage and the Temporality of Solidarity”

Robin Celikates (Free University, Berlin): “Migrant Solidarity”