

LETTER FROM THE CHAIR

SOCIAL PROGRESS AND SOCIAL DECAY

THE PROMISE AND PERILS OF SOLIDARITY



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“Researchers in the sciences of society are bound up with the human equipment of life together: their intervention is not limited to observing and modelling but contributes unfailingly to the elaboration of this equipment in virtue of the systematic viewpoint they adopt.” (Thévenot, 2007, p243)

For the past two years, I have been having an on and off conversation with my colleague Christopher Muller on the topic of solidarity, a concept made salient by recent political shifts in the US and throughout the world [2]. Metaphors of societies infected by pathological organisms, fraying at the seams, imploding from the center, or on the verge of erupting into open conflict easily fill our disciplinary imagination as we try to make sense of the contemporary social and political environment. Our times feel unusually precarious and unpredictable, roiled by economic and technological disruption, widespread defiance and divisiveness, and

shifting power plays across the globe. What is it that will hold individuals and groups together in the future?

These collective woes feel very real, and Chris and I both nod in agreement because we think we know what it is that we are missing. At the same time, we would be hard-pressed to explain it with any real precision. *Solidarity* is easy to invoke, but hard to grasp. Eminently intuitive but fundamentally underspecified, it means different things to different people. To the sociologist, solidarity will refer primarily to models of human sociality, to the types of ties that bind people and groups together, like forms of exchange, gift-giving, and association. The political economist might, instead, associate the notion with the redistribution of resources from rich to poor, with insurance against risk, and with the meaning and function of the public household. To the student of politics, solidarity might evoke collective mobilization, the dynamics of ideology and affiliation, a self-fulfilling belief in a common fate (Ansell 1991),

as in the eponymous Polish trade union, Solidarność. The psychologist, meanwhile, will be reminded of the communicative and emotional processes by which feelings of empathy, understanding, and affinity are generated.

The social sciences are built on the premise that the success of human society depends on the successful accomplishment of solidarity in some form or other, from the development of common understandings, collective goals and ideals, to the intensity of exchange, cooperation, and reciprocity. For sociologists especially, this presumption gives a sense of coherence to the idea of “society” itself, and which in turn may underpin our epistemological confidence that the world can indeed be explained. While “solidarity” itself is too vague an idea to be a directly observable in the world, our disciplinary commitment to its latent presence underpins all manner of measures and diagnoses of interpersonal and intergroup dependencies, collective responsibilities, common interests, emotions and sympathies.

Holistic metaphors of unity and coherence have been with sociology since its beginning, from Comte to Durkheim, from Spencer to Parsons (Levine 1995). Social theorists have long mixed the sheer fact of “living together in the world” (Arendt 1958) together with endorsements of particular forms of society. Solidarity sits uneasily between the descriptive and the normative, blurring the distinction between the object it claims to qualify (the social process) and the qualification itself (normal/pathological; good/bad). As sociologists we tend to value solidarity as such, but the concept is Janus-faced. In practice, the politics of collective belonging

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and organization is rarely unconditional. Some of our most celebrated solidaristic achievements were built on exclusion and division (Rana 2014). Think, for instance, of how the US labor movement often chose white solidarity over class solidarity (DuBois 1999); or of the nativist and racist nature of the extension of economic and social rights during and after the New Deal (Quadagno 1996, Fox 2012, Katznelson 2014); or of the persistence of beliefs about those deserving and undeserving of public assistance (Bloemraad et al. 2019). We can also recall the classist, and sometimes racist, myopia of many recognition-focused social movements (starting with the early women’s movement), the anomic splitting up of recognition claims into ever smaller “groupist” subcategories (Brubaker 2002), the difficulty of deriving social power from claims of social injury (Brown 1995), and the propensity of “affirmative” recognition remedies to generate resentment and backlash from those in the unmarked category (Fraser 1995).

While it is easy, in retrospect, to acknowledge these pathologies of solidarity, the concept’s double-edge persists in subtle ways even amongst those nominally committed to inclusive and expansionary conceptions of society. In a dilemma at least as old as Durkheim, for example, we may have come to look at the subjective experience of others as radically different and intrinsically unbridgeable, and regard this very state of affairs as a form of violence. Solidarity’s political conundrum is that (to use Nancy Fraser’s terms) the cultural politics of recognition often trumps the socioeconomic politics of redistribution.

And yet, as Fraser foresaw, another tension is possible, between a “transformative politics” which plays down

group boundaries *in both* the economic and cultural spheres, and an “affirmative politics” which makes them more salient. That tension is surfacing today. On the one hand, progressives aspire toward ever more inclusive economic, social and cultural rights, such as universal health care, basic income, free college tuition, marriage equality, gender equality and un-differentiation, climate action (which by its nature has to be global), the thinning out of the distinction between legal and illegal migration, or the celebration of spontaneous acts of unconditional “fraternity” against growing institutional restrictions on it. On the other hand, an affirmative politics of a different kind has asserted itself, determined to promote deservingness as a criterion of inclusion, to take away cultural rights in the name of the affirmative beliefs and feelings of “the majority,” to turn the national polity into a symbolic and material fortress, and to restore pride in an unsavory historical past. Both of these politics arguably feed off of each other. Each side poses a threat to the other side, and thus their confrontation provokes a stronger response from both. (Mizrachi 2016) The re-appropriation of affirmative recognition and redistribution by the political right may have the effect of driving the left away from group-based claims and toward the transformative terrain of economic and cultural universalism –and vice versa. Whether we are witnessing the last and foul gasp of a disappearing world, or the painful birth of a new one, who knows (Fraser 2019). But in the uncertain struggle between the two lie the promises and perils of solidarity in the 21st century.

Notes

[1] My thanks to Chris Muller and Kieran Healy for comments and suggestions.

[2] This conversation has motivated the two invited 2019 ASA panels, on “Social Theory and Social Progress” (organized by Chris Muller), and “Social Theory and Social Decay” (organized by yours truly).

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