

Conceptualizing solidarity and realizing struggle: testing against the Palestinian call for the boycott of Israel

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Abstract

The idea of solidarity in transformative political work has been quite fundamental, albeit in very different ways, to both Marxist and Feminist debates. However, despite the widespread implications and applications of these two strands of thought, the scope of solidarity as a liberatory idea has rarely been systematically explored in the context of real-life struggles, which lends greater theoretical rigor to understanding the relationship between solidarity and transformative political work. I take a first step in doing that by putting selections from these two bodies of literature in conversation with each other and juxtaposing them against a brief discursive analysis of a current call for solidarity from Palestinian civil society seeking the boycott, divestment, and sanction (BDS) of the Israeli state until Israel complies with international law and human rights norms as laid out in the demands of the call. I argue that theoretical explorations of solidarity need to be constantly tested against real struggles that occupy different realms of socioeconomic and spatial difference, as displayed by the Palestinian BDS call/movement, because it is in the lived politics of solidarity-based struggle that one is able to determine where greater attention to difference is needed, where commonality of interests lies, and how to engage with the contradictions arising from different forms of solidarity for a transformative (and in this case, transnational) political movement.

Keywords: Solidarity, struggle, Palestine, boycott, Israel, contentious politics, feminism, Marxism.

Introduction

The idea of solidarity is a powerful one. Often symbolized, bodily and illustratively, with the quintessential raised fist, it is an idea that travels across many seas, crosses many borders, results in countless actions and, when realized effectively, can help bring down the most oppressive of forces. It is an idea that has produced inspiring chapters in human history that defy the assumption of individual self-interest capitalism insists we're all motivated by, and instead brings to bear the more sustainable notion of our collective liberation, forcing us to understand that one is not free until all are free.

Of course, there is always an attached romanticism to the idea of solidarity that is rarely realized in actual struggle. Many have explored how and why. This paper seeks to give it a shot as well.

The idea of solidarity and its potential in liberatory struggles has been intensely debated in feminist thought for at least a couple of decades now (Dean, 1996; hooks, 2000; Mohanty, 2003). Feminist debates on solidarity have frequently centered around questions of identity, difference, and location. These debates have derived from understandings of gender and sexuality that reject essentializing notions of a universal feminist identity (Whelehan, 1995; Butler, 1995). Transformative political work infused with an abiding sense of solidarity usually takes place via coalitions and alliances, among other forms of struggle¹. Solidarity and its complexities when realized in struggle has been theorized in much feminist thought, especially those strands which strenuously adhere to understanding gender against multiple contours of oppression like race, class etc.

Prior and unrelated to these debates, a specific notion of solidarity and proletarian internationalism was espoused by Marxist political trends assuming class (i.e. one's relationship to the modes of production) under a universalizing logic of capital as the material basis for the same (Marx and Engels, 1848, 1872). Marxist notions of solidarity/internationalism were perceived under a unitary historical narrative of capital as an ultimately universalizing force producing the two broad subjects of proletariat and bourgeoisie with some complications therein (such as the lumpen proletariat, national bourgeoisie, labor aristocracy and so on). The solidarity espoused thus often subsumed other forms of oppression such as gender, race etc. into class-solidarity, which was theorized as the most important path of struggle under rapidly universalizing capitalist modes of production that was assumed, for the most part, to determine social relations.

The relationship between commonality of experience or material conditions and the politics of solidarity has been quite fundamental, albeit in very different ways, to both Marxist and feminist debates. While the recurrent theme in Marxist examinations on solidarity is its emphasis on class, the recurrent theme in feminist thought (and specifically the texts I examine) has been an emphasis on identity and difference. However, despite the widespread implications and applications of these two strands of thought, the scope of these themes has rarely been systematically explored in the context of real-life struggles², which

¹ To differentiate between the two: coalitions are “built via recognition of one’s own group position in conjunction with one another [where] [e]mpathy, not sympathy, becomes the basis of coalition” (Collins, 2000: 247), while alliances are built on “the *way* we think about race, class, and gender – the political links we choose to make among and between struggles” (Mohanty, 2002: 196).

² I utilize the term “real-life struggles” to denote *conscious willed action*, especially that through which theory or philosophy is transformed into practical social activity; the synthesis of theory and practice seen as a basis for or condition of political and economic change stemming from Marx’s clarion-call at the end of his *Theses on Feuerbach (1969[1845])*, where he states “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways, the point is to change it.” In

lends greater theoretical rigor to understanding the relationship between solidarity and transformative political work.

I take a first step in doing that by putting selections from two bodies of literature that have specific discussions surrounding solidarity in conversation with each other, along with a few others that provide some helpful additions. The selections of these texts have been made keeping in mind two things. One, they specifically take up the notion of solidarity, and two, they have been written with transformative political work in mind. The texts that I take up have been primarily from writers situated in the Global North. This is in part due to my own position as an activist and writer based in the Global North, which determines the texts that I have primary access to, but also because I believe these texts offer rich explorations on solidarity, in addition to pertinence for the specific case study on the Palestinian BDS call, since they focus on coalitions/alliances across difference resulting from solidarity. Finally and very crucially, as with any selection of literature, they are texts that have, to varying degrees, played a role in influencing my own evolution in political thought and praxis (barring a couple that were suggested as part of the peer-review process for this paper).

I then juxtapose them against a discursive analysis of a current call for solidarity from Palestinian civil society seeking the boycott, divestment, and sanction (BDS) of the Israeli state until Israel complies with international law and human rights norms as laid out in the demands of the call. I do this because of the rich possibilities that this offers for dissecting the notion of solidarity specifically aimed at transformative political work which most of, if not all, the strands of thought I examine have a professed interest in doing. I start with an introduction to this specific political call for solidarity that has spawned a highly heterogeneous response from numerous Palestine-solidarity groups, primarily in the Global North.

This introduction is followed by a section examining certain selections of Marxist literature on solidarity and internationalism, and a similar section examining some key strands of Feminist literature on the same. For the section examining feminist notions of solidarity, I have added a couple of texts specifically examining political solidarity with regard to race, as this lends more richness to the examination. I do this also because race, among other identities, has been one of the crucial factors in the break within feminist thought, rejecting a universal sense of womanhood that tended to be quite colonial and racist. This exercise leads to a specific conclusion juxtaposing these two examinations against the Palestinian BDS call, utilizing it as an empirical focal point, and thereby understanding solidarity as a liberatory idea with multiple possibilities/limitations for a transformative politics.

addition, the term is meant to denote *praxis* as defined by Paulo Freire, i.e. "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it." (Freire, 1970: 51) but in combination with what Hannah Arendt (1958) highlighted wherein she saw praxis as the greatest feature of the human condition and the true path to realizing human freedom.

Finally, in terms of the rationale for picking the Palestinian BDS call, it is, as most rationales tend to be, neither random nor devoid of personal biases and life-situations. The movement that it resulted in is one I have been intimately involved in for many years as an activist, during the time I was completing my doctoral courses at the University of Minnesota's Dept. of Geography in Minneapolis with a group called the Minnesota Break the Bonds Coalition, later on for a couple of years with various groups in Toronto after moving there, and ongoing through volunteer work with the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel. The movement also happens to be the empirical foundation for my ongoing doctoral thesis.

The Palestinian call for BDS

On July 9th, 2005, an unprecedented coalition of Palestinian civil-society organizations, activists, academics, intellectuals, and trade-unions called for the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) of the state of Israel³. They urgently requested the international community “in the spirit of international solidarity, moral consistency, and resistance to injustice and oppression” to implement this call “until Israel meets its obligation to recognize the Palestinian people’s inalienable right to self-determination and fully complies with the precepts of international law by: 1. Ending its occupation and colonization of all Arab lands and dismantling the Wall; 2. Recognizing the fundamental rights of the Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel to full equality; and 3. Respecting, protecting and promoting the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties as stipulated in UN resolution 194.” (*Palestinian United Call for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions against Israel*, July 2005)

The call for BDS was endorsed by over 170 Palestinian organizations, collectively referred to as “representatives of Palestinian civil society” within the Occupied Territories of West Bank and Gaza as well as the national territory of Israel. This was reminiscent of and derived directly from the solidarity-calls issued by South African anti-apartheid activists calling for the boycott of apartheid-era South Africa, which were in turn derived from Gandhian civil disobedience and strategic non-violence aimed at gaining the moral high ground in resistance to British colonialism. The Palestinian call for BDS was taken up by numerous Palestine-solidarity movements, primarily in the Global North, to implement campaigns that struggled for the boycott of Israel.

What the BDS movement represents, and is calling for, is a transformative political praxis of emancipatory resistance that matches the evolving socio-spatial apparatus of structural oppression. This structural oppression is identified as the Israeli state which is strongly supported by numerous international allies, the United States being the most powerful of them, and a large Israeli lobby outside the national territory of Israel that constantly works on bolstering continued support for Israel, resulting in the ongoing oppression

³ Please visit <http://www.pacbi.org/> and <http://www.bdsmovement.net/> for more information.

of Palestinians. The call understands that the political-economic sources of this oppression exist beyond the specific geographic boundaries of the state of Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and thus is an attempt to overcome the particular socio-spatial apparatus of Israeli oppression through emergent solidarities. The call thus represents an urgent attempt, among many others, to create an alternative socio-spatial imaginary that strives to match and struggle against that oppression through a call for solidarity. This alternative socio-spatial imaginary is framed in the three demands shown above that the call clearly states, with the idea that solidarity-based BDS measures must be implemented until the demands are met.

At play in the Palestinian call for BDS are two clear notions of solidarity. One, it defines the Palestinian people as a single cultural-national entity against a tripartite structure of oppression consisting of colonialism, racist apartheid and military occupation that has been suffered by them as a cultural-national entity. This is not unlike, say, frameworks of black liberation struggles in the United States (Shelby, 2005). Two, in lieu of this historic injustice, it makes an emotive call for solidarity from clearly defined “international civil society organizations and people of conscience all over the world” outside of that cultural-national entity, to boycott, divest from, and sanction Israel until the oppression ends with the implementation of their three demands. This includes a specific invitation to “conscientious Israelis to support this Call, for the sake of justice and genuine peace”. Thus there are three entities - an oppressed people defined, an oppressor institution identified and everyone else called to stand in solidarity with said oppressed people.

Yet it is not without contradictions as it is a movement whose success is primarily predicated on a perceived solidarity emerging from the traditional power-centers of the Global North. The call emerges from Palestine but it is focused on garnering solidarity from those occupying positions of immense socio-economic privilege over Palestinians, i.e. people and institutions that are not directly impacted by that specific form of oppression. Most of the key BDS movements that have emerged out of this call are in places like New York, Toronto, London, San Francisco and other major cities of the Global North⁴, and organized by residents of these areas who do not face the oppression that Palestinians face. Further, there is a homogeneous notion of “Palestinians” themselves in the call that does not take into account the differences of class, gender, and so on among Palestinians.

Both of these points don’t make the call any less viable for a transformative political praxis based on solidarity, but they offer spaces for further examination. Both of the contradictions are strategic for it can certainly be argued that voices from the Global North in solidarity with Palestinians could play a huge role in making interventions in mainstream discourse in the Global North and, furthermore, that it might not make any political sense (at least for now) to explicitly talk about differences among Palestinians in a solidarity-call

⁴ Please visit <http://www.pacbi.org/> and <http://www.bdsmovement.net/> for more information.

that is issued in support of their collective liberation. It is in the spaces of these contradictions that this call offers the richest points for further exploration of the socio-spatial politics of solidarity and the possibilities it offers.

While in-depth research into the BDS collectives/groups that are emerging from this call is beyond the scope of this paper, I discursively utilize the call itself to examine questions of solidarity and transformative political work by juxtaposing it against selected Marxist and Feminist threads on the same.

It is crucial to frame the paper at this stage by acknowledging the existence of potentially problematic binaries here in calls for solidarity. However, the crucial point to derive from this is that solidarity automatically means someone in solidarity *with* someone else (first binary), “over and against a third” (second binary) as Jodi Dean theorizes (Dean, 1996: 3), and the Palestinian BDS call clearly categorizes. These binaries are important to understand and acknowledge. They cannot be negated if one is to understand and practice the idea of solidarity. Solidarity can rarely be realized by hedging. One has to take a stand with the oppressed, against the oppressor, often running counter to popular cultural norms, accepted social practices, and hegemonic political structures. It's not pure, it's never perfect, but it is the hard work of solidarity.

Nowhere are the imperfections of real-life solidarity work more apparent than in orthodox Marxist understandings of the same.

Class-solidarity, labor, and proletarian internationalism

One of the earliest notions of class-solidarity from an organizational standpoint came with the first International Workingmen's Association (IWMA) in 1864, declaring in its General Rules that the need for solidarity was one of the reasons for the founding of the International. G. M. Stekloff (also known as Yuri Steklov) was an accomplished historian, journalist, and former high-ranking communist within the party in the Soviet Union. Writing in 1928 (with likely little foresight that in about 10 years he was going to be killed during the Stalinist purges), he saw solidarity as the driving force for the International, stating that “in its intervention in strikes, the International had two aims: first of all, to prevent the import of foreign strikebreakers, and secondly, to give direct aid to all the strikers by inaugurating collections and sending money.” (Stekloff, 1928) Marx and Engels end the Communist Manifesto they published in 1848 with the now famous slogan “Workers of the World Unite” – a clarion call for class-solidarity many who haven't even seen the manifesto are likely to know about and also one that Marx would repeat 16 years later at the end of the inaugural address to the First International.

Inherent in this Marxist notion of solidarity is a fundamental predication on class, and an assumption that workers across the world share (or will ultimately share) common material conditions/interests (Pasture and Verberckmoes, 1998: 7). This was explicitly promoted by Marx and Engels when confronting forces within the IWMA that were aligned with the more anarchist politics of Bakunin:

Contrary to the sectarian organization, with their vagaries and rivalries, the International is a genuine and militant organization of the proletarian class of all countries, united in their common struggle against the capitalists and the landowners, against their class power organized in the state. The International's Rules, therefore, speak of only simple "workers' societies" all aiming for the same goal and accepting the same program, which presents a general outline of the proletarian movement, while having its theoretical elaboration to be guided by the needs of the practical struggle and the exchange of ideas in the sections, unrestrictedly admitting all shades of socialist convictions in their organs and Congresses. (Marx and Engels, 1872: Part IV)

Indeed Marx and Bakunin stood on the same side when it came to the primacy of class as the basis for revolutionary struggle, but differed in their understanding and organizational implementation⁵. Class-solidarity as espoused by the IWMA (which was to be the foundation for Marxist political trends from then on) was thus based on an assumption of commonality of material interests, interdependence and a larger goal of fighting for better material conditions for workers worldwide (Baldwin, 1990: 24-25, 33; Johns, 1998: 255). Identity outside of (and hence difference within) class-struggles was seen as either reactionary or at best treated from a pragmatic or tactical standpoint. Popular movements based on nationalist sentiments are one such case-in-point, which were "supported when they assisted the socialist cause or were otherwise beneficial to it" especially when they removed essential causes for discord between workers of different nationalities (Pasture and Verberckmoes, 1998: 3). Thus national identity was seen as a form of difference between workers that could lead to potentially pesky class-divisions, and (like other identities) had to be negotiated with purely on strategic terms, with the ultimate aim of erasing it.

⁵ In *The Communist Manifesto*, and in subsequent documents, Marx argued for the revolutionary subject as that agent of history most capable and in need of revolutionary change based on a relationship to the current modes of production that was further honed in his debates with Bakunin (Marx and Engels, 1848; 1872). Marx didn't believe that only material oppression was enough to constitute revolutionary subjectivity. This was one of the crucial foci of his debate with Bakunin. Bakunin (1866) argued that the lumpen proletariat and peasantry "constituted the sectors less exposed to the influence of bourgeois civilization and, consequently, the best equipped with the necessary instincts for rebellion" (Esteban, 2006).

Marx on the other hand was of the firm belief that the lumpen classes, who possibly faced much harsher material conditions than even the industrial proletariat in his time, were more prone to counterrevolution than revolution (ibid.) because of they did not occupy a revolutionary *relationship* to the modes of production. He thus determined that it was primarily the industrial proletariat that occupied a viable position of revolutionary subjectivity, because it wasn't about the degree of exposure to bourgeois culture that determined revolutionary subjectivity (as it was for Bakunin), but to the modes of production that created that cultural superstructure. It was based on a notion of class, primarily defined by Marxists via "some commonality, either structurally or experientially denned" predicated against a relationship to power, property ownership, and exploitation (Gibson-Graham, 2006[1996]: 49). This was naturally consistent with the base-superstructure paradigm that constituted the ontological framework for Marxist thoughts on social relations (which Gramsci would complicate later on).

Though class-solidarity is spoken of as a singular type of solidarity, one can discern broadly two forms of solidarity in practice. The first is worker-to-worker solidarity in the same production site. Here the commonality of material conditions is immediately evident, with workers theoretically sharing largely similar collective interests (despite identity-based differences) with regard to the betterment of their working conditions and their relationship to the holders of capital in that site (Boswell et al, 2006: 4). This type of solidarity might also incorporate other identities such as race or gender, but ultimately is based on collective interests as workers at that site (Penney, 2006: 156-157; Dixon et al, 2004: 23-24; Hodson et al, 1993: 399-402).

The second is proletarian internationalism which assumes, ultimately, a commonality of interests for workers worldwide and thus a common program for emancipation resulting in solidarity that saw, for example, non-striking workers in one nation supporting striking workers in another nation through sending aid and preventing foreign strikebreakers (Stekloff, 1928). However, the collective material interests among those in solidarity with each other are not as immediate but more abstract, because they are based on a narrative of capital expansion, and as a counter to bourgeois nationalism where “the working class and socialism, and indeed internationalism, are effectively presented as being synonymous” (Pasture and Verberckmoes, 1998: 7). This is all the more evident when, as often happens, the immediate material interests of workers in the same site or region trump long-term internationalist solidarity or when such solidarity degenerates to a paternalistic “labor philanthropy” of northern activists which runs afoul of true internationalism (Gill, 2009: 677).

A crucial issue to add when class-solidarity as enacted out organizationally is the fact that “although they intersect and often coincide, the actors who do battle...and [the] social classes in a more general sense are, in fact, two different entities” (Baldwin, 1990: 11-12), with often little attention paid by Marxists to the “organizational and ideological diversity of the labor movement” (Pasture and Verberckmoes, 1998: 7). It is important to ask in this case when class-solidarity is real, when it is manufactured by actors at the organizational helms, and when it possesses both in varying degrees.

Tommie Shelby speaks of how Black Marxists found it difficult “to get orthodox Marxists to take the black experience seriously” and get them “to accept that there can be no interracial working-class until there is racial justice” (Shelby, 2005: 6-8). A sociological study on two union-drives with very similar structural locations and institutional paths had vastly different results, with workers voting overwhelmingly for the union in one location and overwhelmingly against in the other, primarily because “dynamic interplay between the conditions of work, past cultural contexts, discourse, and collective action affected the way potential union supporters understood the meaning of the movement, and whether or not the union made sense as a vehicle of change” (Penney, 2006: 139, 157).

Meredith Tax writes historically about alliances between various women (a “united front”) in the socialist movement periodically occurring in the late

1800s and early 1900s who “knew there was a dialectical relationship between the movement for women’s liberation and the labor movement, and refused to give up on either,” (Tax, 1980: 13-15) while Diane Balser argues that “Feminists and working women’s organizations need to work with the established labor movement...at the same time that they need to maintain a parallel, independent women’s base that will keep the Feminist vision clear and will provide the *external pressure necessary* [emphasis mine] to motivate labor’s organizing of unorganized women” (Balser, 1987: 214-215). While it might seem like the above examples are recreating divisions between the politics of labor and gender, or labor and race, which are certainly not fixed but rather time/space-specific, what I wish to point out here is the well-understood issue of *difference* among workers that a classical Marxist notion of class-solidarity either fails to account for or only does so with the ultimate idea of subsumption under class struggle.

Apart from socioeconomic difference among workers that labor sociologists have dealt with in great detail, there is another crucial difference pertaining to class-solidarity, namely space, which has been taken up by labor geographers. Rebecca Johns in examining class and space writes:

Workers may have class interests that they share with workers across international borders, and spatial interests that divide them. In reality, there is a conflict between these interests that makes building a truly global movement problematic. The conflict between space and class arises because workers in capitalism’s areas of global development have come to expect a standard of living that accompanies their place in the spatial structures of uneven development. (1998: 255)

What all of the above tells us is that an assumption of class-solidarity brings up the question of socioeconomic and spatial difference within the working-class, usually resulting in the effacement of the same, which has deleterious implications both for workers solidarity on the shop floor as well as the internationalism of labor movements. Whether it be upholding xenophobic, and racist attitudes towards migrant workers or aligning with nationalist sentiment, the failure to address real difference drastically reduces the possibility for real solidarity/internationalism and ultimately defeats any movement towards bettering material conditions for workers. It remains consistent with a class-based political analysis, to not only understand that the effacement of difference (which can be done even when difference is acknowledged, but without genuine political engagement) only ultimately weakens the workers movement, but that, crucially, “respecting diversity does not mean uniformity or sameness” (hooks, 2000: 58).

It stands to reason that, while powerful and important, there are many failings in such homogenizing projections of class-solidarity. But where orthodox Marxism (and many other strains of left thought) faltered, transnational feminist thought valiantly endeavored to advance.

Political solidarity, identity, and difference

Feminist thought continues to critically define and call for egalitarian modes of political engagement, especially with regard to understanding the notion of political solidarity while concurrently juxtaposing it against other ideas like sisterhood. Most importantly, this notion of solidarity has crucially brought understandings of differential privilege and power within solidarity-based movements to the fore. This is something that Marxist trends failed to do, as their notions of class-solidarity/internationalism were predicated on a homogeneous class narrative. No matter, because a brief examination of a few feminist thinkers quickly addresses this problem.

Jodi Dean calls for a reflective solidarity that acts as a “bridge between identity and universality” defined as “the mutual expectation of a responsible orientation to relationship” (Dean, 1996: 3). Dean models solidarity as interaction involving three actors in two moments of action, where one is asked to “stand by [another] over and above a third”. This is not unlike calls for workers-solidarity and proletarian internationalism where workers are asked to stand in solidarity with each other over and above the forces of capital. Dean, however, further expands on this by stating that “rather than presuming the exclusion and opposition of the third, the ideal of reflective solidarity thematizes the voice of the third to reconstruct solidarity as an inclusionary ideal for contemporary politics and society.” She goes on to state that reflective solidarity provides for difference “because it upholds the possibility of a universal, communicative ‘we’” rather than one that is “conceived of oppositionally, on the model of ‘us vs. them’” and indeed anchored in a mutual respect for difference (Ibid.: 8. 16). Listing the problems of conventional solidarity as that of time, exclusion, accountability, and questioning critique, she posits reflective solidarity as a step forward, one that “take[s] seriously the historical conditions of value pluralism, the ever present potential for exclusion, the demands of accountability, and the importance of critique” through ties that are “communicative and open” (Ibid.: 21-30).

In calling for reflexivity, the solidarity we see being talked about above has a strong affective moment in it that brings engaging with difference in an open, empathetic manner without ultimately aiming for “sameness” (Gray, 2004: 415, 422-426). Sandra Bartky pointedly asks whether there is some “special affective repertoire necessary for the building of solidarities across lines of race and class that is not necessary when these lines are not crossed?” (Bartky, 1997: 180) It is important here to state that Marxist calls for internationalism have equally affective moments in them, slogans like “workers of the world unite!” for instance, but the emotive aspect of the call is not acknowledged because of an assumption of class homogeneity. There is a difference, however, between an affective call to solidarity (which Marxist calls for internationalism produce), and affect as utilized by feminist calls to solidarity.

I would like to write a couple of lines on this “affective repertoire” in building solidarity, as the importance of it is often unacknowledged, much more so in Marxism than feminism. In Marxist calls, the affective element is rendered to

make the actual call based on common material conditions, rather than one that is meant to (also) work affectively. The assumption is that workers of the world indeed can and should unite based on a fundamentally common material relationship to the modes of production, and hence what is in fact a very affective call, is seen as a universal truth. In other words, affect is used to make the call, but the way in which that call can produce affective results among those the call is being made to is ignored. This is unlike many calls for political solidarity made by feminist thinkers, who see the affective element in them as one of the key ways of engaging with difference. Bernice Johnson Reagon comes to mind here. Chandra Mohanty states that Reagon's notion of coalition, transnational or cross-cultural, "underscores the significance of the traditions of political struggle, what she calls an 'old-age perspective'...forged on the basis of memories and counter narratives, not on an ahistorical universalism" (Mohanty, 2003: 117).

This also shows how the notion of internationalism is not just a Marxist deployment, but a feminist one as well, albeit in very different ways. It is a more heterogeneous internationalism that is being called for rather than a homogeneous one. Feminists do it by acknowledging difference, often through engaged affective moments, rather than subsuming them. In acknowledging that difference, reflexivity is the manner that Dean chooses to address the differences between actors in solidarity with one another, and it can be seen that she writes this specifically for those actors who are in a significantly more privileged socioeconomic position than those they might be in solidarity with.

Similar to Dean, Sally Scholz examines political solidarity through a lens of racial justice and how members of a privileged group can understand institutional injustice. She lays the groundwork for a theory of political solidarity, asking what it means and how it differs fundamentally from other social and political concepts like camaraderie, association, or community. Political solidarity, in contrast to social solidarity and civic solidarity, aims to bring about social change by uniting individuals in their response to particular situations of injustice, oppression, or tyranny. She states that any commitment to solidarity "requires an active acknowledgement of the experience of the oppressed" (Scholz: 2008: 167), which for her requires the overcoming of "false white identity." This can, according to Scholz, be achieved through the renunciation of privilege, understanding historical and experiential oppression, and participation in acts of resistance (Ibid.: 181).

Mohanty on the other hand, in calling for a political solidarity inspired by Dean, states that "class struggle, narrowly defined, can no longer be the only basis for solidarity among women workers" (Mohanty, 2003: 142). Like Dean, diversity and difference are crucial values for Mohanty "to be acknowledged and respected, not erased in the building of alliances" (Ibid.: 7). She brings in political solidarity in critique of a homogenizing notion of sisterhood espoused by Robin Morgan, using a notion of coalition as argued for by Reagon coupled with Dean's idea of reflective solidarity. Mohanty argues for a political solidarity among women workers "defined as a community or collectivity among women

workers across class, race, and national boundaries that is based on shared material interests and identity and common ways of reading the world” (Ibid.: 144-145), with active political struggle being one of the crucial markers for solidarity over sisterhood. For Mohanty, common material conditions under a heterogeneous logic of capital are critical to developing a sense of solidarity. She states that “the logic and operation of capital in the contemporary global arena” is a shared history between Third and First World women (Ibid.: 167). Indeed, what Mohanty calls for is in fact a heterogeneous form of class-solidarity among a global class of “women workers”. She attempts to distance the call from its potential universalizing tendencies by adding, “[T]his does not mean that differences and discontinuities in experience do not exist or that they are insignificant” (Ibid.: 145), but arguing for an ideological definition and redefinition of women’s work, based on a non-unitary logic of capital taking into account other histories/logics, that would lay the political platform for common struggles.

At this point I’d like to take the liberty of briefly engaging with a very non-feminist, but significantly influential, text on solidarity. I do this not just because I arbitrarily can, but because the text has a deep, albeit somewhat paternalistic, engagement with difference and oppression in the realization of solidarity. Paulo Freire (who counted Marx, Althusser, and Satre among others as his greatest influences), in his oft-quoted *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, addresses the “humanist educator and the authentic revolutionary”, i.e. he too writes for those in solidarity with the oppressed, and very emotively calls for love as the best route to greater humanization; not a love that is sentimental but as an act of freedom, a political love that is liberating. In addition he calls for a notion of faith, not a “distorted” view of god leading to fatalism, but a faith in people, specifically in the oppressed. Notwithstanding the dangers of paternalism in Freire’s calls, what we can garner is that there is a fundamental, and for the most part very true, assumption that a transformative politics of solidarity often involves actors occupying positions of vast socioeconomic difference, and hence requiring very critical ways of engaging with that difference. Where Dean chooses to address it by arguing for reflexivity, Scholz by positing the renunciation of privilege with acknowledgement of oppression, and Mohanty with a call for an ever-evolving sense of political solidarity, Friere chooses love and faith. What is common to all of them is an acknowledgement of difference among actors engaged in solidarity-based transformative politics and hence suggested ways to address those differences.

A common thread running through all of the writers cited in this section is a keen attention to socioeconomic difference among actors involved in the act of political solidarity. In addition, there is a challenge from all of them in different ways to universalizing assumptions that can lead to the kind of class-reductionism we see in many Marxist calls for class-solidarity and internationalism. Indeed the very assumption that there is some universal – “the mistaken belief that there is some ultimate word, presence, essence, reality, or truth that can provide a foundation for theory, experience, and expression” (Bartky, 1997: 178) – is challenged by this solidarity-enmeshed “politics of

difference [that] puts into question...the idea of a social totality” (Sawicki, 1986: 23-24). Of interest is that these calls for and constructions of solidarity are done while still maintaining the importance of defining it against material conditions and forms of oppression, either shared or otherwise. Here is where one can find small paradoxes in many of the above theorists; and thereby allowing spaces for critique and further improvement to open up.

Are there traces of utopianism inherent in these calls for solidarity? I, of course, ask such a rhetorical question as a way of suggesting that there are.

Furthermore, can acknowledging difference through variously constructed calls for solidarity ironically play the role of effacing the very difference that is sought to be engaged with? Simply put, stating that one ought to be reflexive (Dean), acknowledge oppression and overcome privilege (Scholz), show love and faith (Freire), or work with a heterogeneous logic of capital for solidarity among women workers (Mohanty), does not mean much if it doesn't take into account real struggles with all the contradictions present in them, and can in fact even do damage if seen as an end in and of themselves.

What is it that constitutes real struggle here? It is that which can test these abstract theoretical constructs, and thereby check the levels of possibility for transformative political work. This is not to say that these calls are inherently utopian or elitist, but that there is the *danger* of them being so, especially if found wanting when tested in real-life struggles. This can result in theoretical calls for attention to identity and difference merely staying in the realm of the individual (more often than not the lefty academic researcher ensconced quite permanently within the ivory tower) who might be making those calls in the production of “collaborative” knowledge that finds great acceptance in conferences and whatnot. Can these very rich constructs of solidarity then stand the test of real struggle? I would like to compare them briefly to the Palestinian call for BDS to try and find out. It must be stated that these are brief juxtapositions against one particular call for solidarity, and by no means an exhaustive analysis of these constructs. However, the BDS call is predicated on a very clear and well-defined understanding of solidarity, which makes it a rich, emerging, real-life struggle to discursively examine these constructs of solidarity against.

There is a danger with Dean's important call for reflexivity for instance, because in correctly calling for reflexivity she runs the risk of negating the oppositional “third” party in her own very lucid framework of solidarity. It is dangerous because solidarity clearly means, however difficult it might be to swallow, that there is opposition to a third actor happening (as Marxist class-solidarity understands, at least theoretically, with regard to the controllers of the instruments of production in a capitalist system). When a real-life call for solidarity is made, it is often against an oppositional third, as the BDS call identifies being the Israeli state. There is a danger in Mohanty, when she talks of “common material interests,” yet paints herself into an ideological corner with the acknowledgement that “differences and discontinuities” are certainly significant. This automatically stands in contradiction against the material

commonality she seeks for women workers across race, class, national boundaries and so on. Real-life calls sometimes seek solidarity from certain people/institutions precisely *because* they occupy positions of material privilege, as the BDS call identifies with the international community it seeks solidarity from. On a contrasting note, there is a danger in Scholz when she calls for an overcoming of privilege by members of a privileged group who seek to stand in solidarity with the oppressed, with the problematic assumption that privilege, historically and structurally manifested, *can* be overcome.

Real-life calls for solidarity often uphold the leadership role of the oppressed group calling for solidarity, and defining the form that it should take (as the BDS call does), to prevent the movement from being led by more privileged groups who might stand in solidarity with the oppressed group in the knowledge that privilege, no matter how well-meaning the person is, cannot be renounced that easily. There is a danger in Freire when he calls for love and faith, without adequate measures to see whether indeed this love and faith is not merely masking structural inequalities between the “oppressed” and those that stand in solidarity with them. Real-life calls for solidarity often have specific guidelines on what that solidarity should look like in order to prevent an assumption of good-heartedness on the part of those showing solidarity as sufficient to uphold it consistently, as shown in the guidelines for boycott laid out by the Palestinian BDS call. None of the above in any way suggests that these constructs of solidarity are not viable or useful. On the contrary, because they acknowledge difference and seek ways to address them, they become all the more important to understand and realize in real-life acts of solidarity conducted across that difference, but need to be taken up with care.

The potential dangers in these constructs of solidarity thus become easier to identify and address only when tested against real-life struggles. To better understand this problem it’s useful to see Tommie Shelby’s examination of the philosophical foundations of black solidarity, which he argues should be rooted in a Du Bois-inspired “common experience of racial injustice and the stigma of being racialized as ‘black’...a specifically *political* mode of blackness” and a Frederick Douglas-inspired “mutual recognition of a common subordinate position and the collective commitment to rise above it” (Shelby, 2005: 244-248). Shelby focuses also on class-differentiation within blacks, and rejects shared ethno-racial identity, a notion of an autonomous black community with collective control over black life, and the notion that a collective identity is required for an effective solidarity. Instead his idea of black solidarity is “based strictly on the shared experience of racial oppression and a joint commitment to resist it” (Ibid.: 11-12). While black solidarity remains the core of his work, he nevertheless puts forward a construct for “those with whom blacks should seek solidarity with” who “are not necessarily those who most exhibit thick black identity, but those who stand firm in resistance to black oppression” (Ibid.: 247). This is in contrast to Scholz who does the same, but approaching it from the other end of the solidarity binary of oppressed and those-in-solidarity-with-the-oppressed. Shelby acknowledges the same socioeconomic difference between oppressed and those in solidarity with the oppressed, but takes into

account both solidarity *within* the oppressed group, and solidarity between that oppressed group and those outside of it.

How, then, can political solidarity that takes into account difference in various ways as shown above become more than identity politics that “serve little purpose beyond an involitional elitist narcissism,” but rather “distinguish between hegemonic and antihegemonic cultural practices as well as between those of the powerful and the powerless” (Dirlik and Prazniak, 2001: 3)?

I’d like to go to bell hooks, who I feel comes closest to addressing some of these dangers. She calls for the rejecting of a false sense of sisterhood “based on shallow notions of bonding” but, unlike Mohanty, argues that the abandonment of sisterhood “as an expression of political solidarity weakens and diminishes Feminist movement” (hooks, 2005: 44-45). hooks calls for a “united front” much akin to the kind of fronts that Meredith Tax studied with the alliances that women in the socialist movement formed in the US in the late 1800s and early 1900s. What hooks puts forward is in many ways a combination of what Mohanty and Dean speak of. It is a solidarity that seeks to be built under certain material commonalities that working women might go through (not unlike the fundamental basis for Marxist class-solidarity), but being also crucially attentive to very important socioeconomic differences. Speaking directly about and to “white women liberationists,” hooks states that a self-identification as victims could result in an abdication of “responsibility for their role in the maintenance and perpetuation of sexism, racism, and classism, which they did by insisting that only men were the enemy”, and that the call for sisterhood was seen by many black women as a call that didn’t address the forms of oppression they went through (Ibid.: 46-51). This can be equally pertinent to a notion of Marxist solidarity that looks only at the holders of capital as the enemy, thereby effacing difference and privilege within the working-class that can work against true class-solidarity. It can be equally pertinent to other constructions of solidarity based on other identities that might efface difference and privilege within the oppressed group by looking only at a single enemy as *the* enemy. hooks remains attentive in an uncomplicated yet profound manner to the contours of race and class that exist within feminist movements, when calling for a political solidarity based on the notion of sisterhood.

Solidarity, whether within Marxist trends or feminist trends or any other, presupposes a people to be in solidarity *with*. However, this has different connotations depending on the different actors involved in the process of solidarity. Solidarity between workers in a trade union on the same production site is different from solidarity in a multi-sited association of labor movements, which is further different from solidarity between activists in the US and labor struggles in Latin America. Similarly solidarity between black and white workers in a trade union on the same production site, is different than the solidarity among black workers in a multi-sited labor association, which is further different from the solidarity showcased between anti-apartheid activists in the US and black workers in South Africa. The direct material commonalities decrease with each subsequent scalar level of solidarity, while socioeconomic

and/or spatial difference increases, requiring the need to address that difference as attempted by many Feminist thinkers.

What all of the above showcases in a sense is that both Marxist notions of class solidarity, and political solidarity as constructed by different strands of Feminist thinkers have very important critiques to offer each other, but more importantly for integration into a transformative politics. One way I argue this can be achieved is by juxtaposing them against real-life struggles, like the Palestinian call for BDS, i.e. *testing* them beyond their theoretical abstractions.

Conclusion

The Sangtin Writers, a collective of feminist activists from a small town in northern India, have a succinct test for what they consider to be "usable" feminist visions. They state that "*a feminist vision that the activists cannot operationalize in their own communities is not a usable feminism for the collective. [emphasis mine]*" (Nagar and Sangtin Writers, 2006: 147). It is a litmus test that holds true for any liberatory praxis, i.e. to be able to *operationalize* any liberatory idea, including the idea of solidarity. David Featherstone, in his useful book *Solidarity*, further explains this as the "constructions of internationalisms [or solidarities] from below" (Featherstone, 2012: 8)⁶, which Nira Yuval-Davis, inspired by Patricia Hill Collins, offers some organizing tools to achieve with her examination of *transversalism* (in contrast to universalism), emphasizing the need for dialogue across difference (as opposed to an assumption of common viewpoints), with difference encompassed by equality, and solidarity emerging from common values reached via that dialogic process (Yuval-Davis, 2012: 50-52).

In other words, the realization of solidarity has to be grounded in, emerge from, and evolve within real-life struggles. It must acknowledge flesh-and-blood people who, despite all their differences, are finding common ground to wage a liberatory struggle.

Done this way, it reveals the multifaceted and chaotic nature of solidarity as a liberatory idea. It's messy work, and the messiness needs to be acknowledged and honored. It becomes increasingly clear that solidarity realized in real-life struggles is never quite as neat and clean as solidarity that is envisioned, and that often frameworks of solidarity fall flat when operationalized. It is those conceptualizations of solidarity that can withstand tests against real-life struggles that interest me more because they're the ones that can be operationalized. As someone who considers himself committed to liberatory

⁶ Also see Featherstone's discussion on "solidarity without guarantees" (Featherstone, 2012: 243-254) where he "draws on Stuart Hall's project of rethinking left politics in open and productive terms as bearing on generative practices of articulation" via one, "an insistence on the terms of solidarity not being given [in order to open] up a sense of the diverse struggles over how solidarities are to be fashioned and constructed" and two, "thinking solidarities in relational terms [in order to allow] an engagement with the diverse relations and connections shaped through solidarities."

politics, I also believe that this notion of solidarity could best be understood in a movement that I'm actively involved in and, in order to stay within the scope of this paper, juxtaposed against the international call for solidarity that spawned that movement.

So, how can all of the above be related to the Palestinian call for BDS? I will start by reverting back to the two moments of solidarity at play in the call. The first is the manner in which the "Palestinian people" are defined, which is at once predicated against the common oppression that Shelby speaks of in his understanding of black solidarity, that Mohanty speaks of when speaking of solidarity among women workers, and crucially also very similar to the basic manner in which class-solidarity as conceived of by Marxist thought is constructed, i.e. based on common material interests. But it is also predicated against a reductionist, homogenized national identity similar to the kind of nationalism that Pasture and Verberckmoes critique in their examination of working-class internationalism. It is important to understand however that this definition is strategic, i.e. deployed by the BDS call specifically in order to construct a notion of solidarity with them as an oppressed whole, based on the fact that all Palestinians, regardless of differences among them, face oppression of varying kinds and intensities at the hands of the Israeli state.

The second moment of solidarity is in the solidarity that the BDS calls for from the international community. Here too, there are resonances with Marxist understandings of class-solidarity, because the Palestinian call for the BDS of Israel that seeks to bring down the structures of oppression that Palestinians suffer, albeit in varied manners, as a *cultural-national* people, will (at least theoretically) undo an "essential cause for discord" (Pasture and Verberckmoes, 1998: 3) between Palestinian and Israeli *workers*, which falls fully within a Marxist notion of class-solidarity, even if that is clearly not the stated aim of the call. However the kind of solidarity that the BDS call seeks from the international community has as much relevance with feminist reflexivity, love, faith, and attention to difference, because it is seeking solidarity from people clearly identified by the call itself as being outside of the immediate realm of oppression that the Palestinians are under.

In other words it seeks to leverage the privilege of Palestine-solidarity activists in the Global North, privilege that is no doubt a result of imperialist and colonial structures of oppression, in order to dismantle a form of apartheid, colonialism, and military occupation that is rooted in those very same structures of oppression.

The BDS call does this because it accounts for the gargantuan apparatus of support the Israeli state enjoys in the Global North in this current day and age. It is an apparatus of support that is consistent with the instrumentality of US imperialism, and hence bolstered politically, economically, socially, and culturally by the same actors and powers-that-be that reproduce US imperialism. The Palestine-solidarity movement cannot ever hope to compete with the vast social, political, and economic resources of the pro-Israel forces in the US. Hence the call and the movement it has borne, warts and all, has

adopted the strategy of intervening in mainstream cultural discourse by strategically occupying the moral high ground, achieved in part by leveraging the privilege of activists in the Global North. It's problematic. It's difficult. It's messy.

It's also real life.

The contradictions are there for anyone to see. It's not immaculate, but no real-life struggle resisting oppression can afford to be lest they risk complete and utter marginalization. Part of the reason why the BDS movement has continued to be a thorn in the side of the enormously powerful pro-Israel forces is precisely because, in addition to being a fundamentally anti-oppressive movement, it is a strategically astute one.

This is why theoretical explorations of solidarity need to be constantly tested against real struggles that occupy different realms of socioeconomic and spatial difference. Workers in the same shop floor have an immediate common material interest in organizing in class-solidarity with each other, as do Palestinians in Ramallah or Jerusalem organizing in national-solidarity with each other against Israeli oppression. When activists outside of those immediate material conditions act in solidarity with them, the commonality of interests becomes more abstract and less immediate. It can be argued that activists organizing in solidarity with workers in a shop floor they don't work in is ultimately in resistance to the machinations of capital that bear down on them as well, but it is not within the immediate realm of the specific material interests of those workers. Similarly it can be argued that by organizing in solidarity with Palestinian struggles for self-determination, activists are organizing in resistance to imperialism and colonialism that has significant implications to them as well. Seen in this way, solidarity can be conceived of as not necessarily being only rooted in a pre-assigned idea of common material *conditions*, but more importantly an investment in an ever evolving idea of common material *politics*.

The BDS call at once occupies different spatial and socioeconomic levels. The socioeconomic conditions inherent in the definition of the Palestinian people, while not accounting for differences within the Palestinian people, is very different than the socioeconomic and spatial conditions of the international community in the Global North that the BDS call is calling for solidarity from. Similarly the spatial aspects of Israelis, themselves members of the Global North, who respond in solidarity to the BDS call is very different than solidarity-activists in other parts of the Global North. This can have important implications for the BDS movement itself. Seen in this manner, the BDS call provides an interesting platform to understand that it is in the lived politics of solidarity-based struggle that one is able to determine where greater attention to difference is needed, where commonality of interests lies, and how to engage with the contradictions arising from different forms of solidarity for a transformative political movement (and the messiness therein).

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