

Exploring the problems of solidarity

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What is international solidarity and what are the challenges it faces? In order to explore these issues and to examine the changing world and work of solidarity organisations, a one-day conference was held in Trinity College Dublin last December (2013). The event was sponsored by the Department of Sociology TCD in association with the Institute for International Integration Studies. International solidarity was explored from both an academic and an activist perspective, resulting in lively debate and discussion. A full programme can be found at <http://www.tcd.ie/iis/events/conference-Internationalsolidaritypracticesproblemspossibilities.php>); below is a conference report by the organisers.

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The conference took place on December 6th, the day after the death of Nelson Mandela. Several people at the conference had met Nelson Mandela and had worked in solidarity with the ANC; one thing the event did was to concentrate participants' minds on the long tradition of Irish political solidarity with South Africa which has ranged from Irish support given to the Boers in turn-of-the-century South Africa to the somewhat different support shown to the anti-apartheid movement in the 1970s and 1980s. This served as a stark illustration of the different meanings people have ascribed to solidarity in different eras.

While it would be impossible to do full justice to a range of papers that discussed case studies from Palestine solidarity and NATO intervention in Libya to solidarity practices in Rosspport, NW Ireland, certain key oppositions and common problems emerged from the day. These were:

1. The opposition between political and humanitarian understandings of solidarity, in particular how the humanitarian version has been gaining ground, partly due to the professionalization of transnational solidarity organisations and NGOs.
2. The difficult relationship between solidarity activists and those they stand in solidarity with. Cultural and political tensions in this relationship were seen in places as far apart as Rosspport and Palestine.
3. The tensions between the universal and the particular in the practice of solidarity.

The politics of solidarity

The keynote speaker was Peter Waterman, author of the recent *Recovering Internationalism, Creating the New Global Solidarity*. In his paper he sought to answer what we mean by the concept of solidarity by providing a typology of solidarity relationships. He proposed six associated meanings of “solidarity” based on relationships that can move from situations of mutual identification to exchange relationships to unequal relationships. These were solidarity based on: *common identity*; *affinity* (ideological identification); *reciprocity* (exchange between equals); *complementarity* (support exchanged for inspiration); *substitution* (the powerful helping the powerless); and *restitution* (the powerful righting past wrongs).

Waterman pointed out that most practices of solidarity have multiple meanings. For instance, the phrase “workers of the world, unite!” can serve as an expression of identity, affinity and in practical terms, of reciprocal solidarity. This overall typography of solidarity proved useful in understanding and comparing the various solidarity movements discussed at the conference.

One definition of solidarity which Waterman proffered was that “solidarity is a relationship forged through political struggle which seeks to challenge forms of oppression”. This is similar to Chandra Mohanty’s argument that solidarity must be based on a “common context of struggles against specific exploitative structures and systems.” (Mohanty 2003, 49). According to this articulation, what enables solidarity to move beyond expressions of common identity is a sense of common resistance. This means of understanding solidarity opened up a key question of the conference – the relationship of solidarity with other forms of politics, particularly class politics.

The last speaker of the day, David Featherstone, in his talk, “The construction of solidarities and the politicisation of the crisis”, spoke of how the notion of solidarity can be employed in order to repoliticise opposition to the current crisis of neoliberalism. In contrast to a common left-wing narrative of resistance in the crisis as being merely reactive and defensive, a reading of solidarity as a political relationship rather than a humanitarian gesture can be deployed to open up different possibilities and political imaginaries in the current conjuncture.

An example of this reading where international solidarity offers a practical critique of neoliberalism, allowing people to rearticulate opposition and alternatives, can be seen in responses to the Chilean junta takeover in 1973 – a key moment of neoliberalism. Chileans and others could contest the imposition of neoliberalism in a transnational fashion through the practice of solidarity, whether it was the refusal of English workers to work on war material supplied to the newly formed dictatorship or the trade union-orchestrated boycott of “fascist” Chilean produce. This boycott was not articulated as a disembodied humanitarian gesture to the poor people of Chile but rather as a response to fellow workers and their lives under fascism. Such international solidarity was reciprocal; the coup as well as Chilean exiles in Britain helped shape the

political imaginations of British people, with many exiles becoming involved in disputes such as the 1985 miner's strike. One can see a similar process in the recent activities of "IMF refugees" from Latin America in Spain and how their struggle and presence has helped shape and contribute to the political struggles in contemporary Spanish society.

The political nature of solidarity and its contestation was a key theme in Gavin Brown and Helen Yaffe's discussion of the non-stop picket outside the South African embassy, "Practices of solidarity: opposing apartheid in the centre of London". In their paper, Brown and Yaffe reminded us that while on the occasion of Nelson Mandela's death everyone appeared to be against apartheid, yet eulogists of Mandela such as David Cameron were at the time members of the Federation of Conservative Students which sold t-shirts with the slogan "Hang Mandela". It was in that polarised context that a group of young people set up the "City of London Anti-Apartheid Group" or "City Group", whose main political influence was the International Communist Group, and were a separate group from the "official" Anti-Apartheid movement and with no support from the ANC. They sat outside the South African embassy in the heart of London, in a permanent picket from 1986 to 1990.

As opposed to the current attempts of Cameron et al to depoliticise the nature of the anti-apartheid struggle, the non-stop picket was squarely placed in the political narrative of solidarity. The politicisation of this group of young activists (many women, many unemployed, many from migrant backgrounds) in the hardships of Thatcher's era went hand in hand with their approach to international solidarity. Domestic politics loomed large in their stance against apartheid: they opposed Thatcher and *therefore* they opposed apartheid. Class, gender and racial dynamics within the group were also mirroring domestic politics and impacting the community of solidarity activists. This group, in one word, was as much a product of Thatcher's politics as of apartheid.

Nevertheless, the idea of solidarity being a political term remains highly contested. Several speakers talked about how the notion of solidarity has moved from a "third world approach" dominant until the 80s, to a "civil society and human rights approach" dominant today. This was a prominent element in Anna Bernard's exploration of the Palestinian film "Five Broken Cameras" and how this film was used at screenings to create feelings of solidarity with Palestine among Western viewers. Prominent here was the use of the personal element and the process of individual identification in order to create feelings of collective solidarity. This talk indicated the ambiguous way in which new technologies are put to use to facilitate new approaches to solidarity and new ways to provoke mobilisation.

One reason for the shift of solidarity towards a more humanitarian understanding, Peter Waterman argued, was the professionalisation of solidarity practices which has created a continuum between NGOs, social movements and the state and promoted an ideology of engagement as opposed to confrontation. This issue formed a central part of the paper delivered by José Gutiérrez discussing the experience of Grupo Raíces, a small Irish-based

Colombian solidarity group. The talk explored the transition from an identity and affinity modality of solidarity - variants of the “third world approach” - to the current “civil society approach”. The problem with the professionalization of solidarity and the current human rights discourse, José argued, was that it had nothing meaningful to say about or offer to transformative struggles such as that in Colombia.

This was contrasted with the solidarity approach that orients the work of Grupo Raíces, where action is not taken on behalf of an object of solidarity, but through active engagement as equals, from a global justice perspective. He claimed that this approach has contributed to the politicisation of the debate on Colombia in Ireland, moving it away a neutral, technical and detached human rights discourse, and reclaiming a human rights tradition critical of power and supportive of active citizenship. This solidarity approach has led the group towards an understanding of the right to rebellion in its context, as against the dominant human rights approach which equates it to a quasi-criminal activity. This moves the debate beyond the “cult of the victim” (deserving sympathy as long as they are powerless, losing it when fighting back), and away from an exclusive reliance on human rights professionals towards prioritising grassroots movement in Colombia. This was not to deny the problems that remain in the group’s practices, such as an over-reliance on lobbying and advocacy tactics and failure to connect local and global struggles.

International solidarity or biased foreign intervention?

The difficulty of connecting local and global perspectives as well as the problematic nature of solidarity activism was further explored in Ayça Çubukçu’s contribution “On global solidarity: some conceptual problems”. This talk addressed the question of how transnational solidarity relates to foreign intervention, arguing that people label an act “solidarity” or “intervention” depending on who they understand as the proper subject of politics. Taking the 2011 intervention in Libya as a case study, or rather the debates surrounding this intervention, the paper investigated the claims and counterclaims as to whether what took place was humanitarian solidarity or imperialist intervention.

During the Libyan uprising, there were calls for the international community to intervene and protect Libyans from massacres by Colonel Gaddafi, and claims that the Libyans were begging “us” to intervene. Many who opposed intervention accused the other side of hypocritically instrumentalising human rights to pursue their imperialist projects. However, posing the problem as an insincere application of cosmopolitan ideals, while failing to problematize these cosmopolitan ideals is an insufficient response to these calls for military intervention, since different versions of internationalisms come together to support or oppose intervention. The key argument on the interventionist side was that the West needed to intervene in Libya to protect human rights and to forward the autonomous struggle of the people of Libya.

What then does it mean in practice to support the autonomy of a national struggle such as in Libya? While interventionists identified a singular legitimate authority among the Libyan resistance to the government and echoed its desire for intervention, the other side denied the existence of such an authority or viewed this intervention as compromising the autonomy of the Libyan struggle and that of other uprisings too. According to Çubukçu, “the mutable borders of the political communities we imagine, the importance we attach to their autonomy, and who we take to be political subjects within these borders” all affect whether we place the term “solidarity” or “intervention” on such political acts. At the same time she noted that this does not fully deal with the challenge of differentiating acts of transnational solidarity from acts of foreign intervention and there remains a need to examine commonalities as well as differences between the two.

While Ayça Çubukçu addressed the problem of applying universalism in solidarity activities, Richard Irvine and David Landy in their joint paper “Putting the blinkers on: partiality and Palestinian solidarity” dealt with the associated problem of partiality and sectarianism in solidarity activism, and how this picking of sides serves to undercut the original purposes of solidarity, in particular the political effects of this solidarity both domestically and abroad.

In his discussion of Palestinian solidarity, Richard Irvine talked about the effects of supporting one side over another and how this can lead to a dehumanisation and rejection of the other side. The lack of empathy with others can lead in the case of Israel/Palestine to solidarity activists mirroring the exclusivist ideology of Zionism rather than seeking to transcend it. Rather than such blind partiality, Richard argued that solidarity activists should try to counter exclusivism with a meaningfully inclusivist ideology - the sort of universalist ideology which for better or worse leads people to solidarity in the first place, rather than simple identification with one side or the other. The central question here is where the solidarity activist stands in relation to the exclusivist, sectarian statements or the inhuman acts of the oppressed people.

David Landy argued that what one customarily does in relation to the people one is in solidarity with, is to ignore such uncomfortable questions by talking up an primordial unity of the people that one is in solidarity with and seeking to avoid internal politics and divisions. The refusal to get involved in internal politics is a means of declaring a belief in the autonomy of the object of solidarity, of seeing them as political subjects in their own right, and maintaining a level of respect for them. Although done for the best of reasons, this refusal to engage can limit the actions of solidarity groups and lead to a superficial understanding of solidarity. This is something that can limit the political imagination of the solidarity activist and thwart solidarity’s transformative potential and possibility for mutual emancipation.

Confronting colonialism in solidarity activism from Palestine to Rossport

While there is a problem with failing to engage honestly with the object of solidarity, there is perhaps a greater problem when this engagement does happen, due to the colonial attitudes of the solidarity activist and power imbalance between the activist and subjects of solidarity. This key tension in solidarity activism was the topic of Elaine Bradley's autoethnographic discussion "International Solidarity with Palestine and Colonial Oppression Walking the thin line between the two."

It goes without saying that cultural hegemony and orientalism are present in western solidarity with Palestine, and that the colonial relations contained within solidarity activists influence the forms of solidarity practiced. The paper discussed as an example the expectation among some solidarity activists that Palestinians should be grateful to them, and the indignation they displayed when this gratitude was not expressed.

Seeing colonialism, among other things, as a discourse which interpellates the colonised, the way in which solidarity groups talk about the situation and Palestinians can be seen as contributing to their powerlessness. Elaine Bradley noted the disjuncture between Palestinians using the language of resistance, liberation and self-determination, while Western solidarity groups and especially those working in Palestine use a rhetoric of human rights. The enchantment that solidarity activists have with non-violent resistance, she argued was an attempt to dictate forms of resistance by delegitimising and closing off discussion of other types of resistance. Furthermore, this fetishisation of non-violence colludes with the racist narrative of armed resistance as terrorism and Palestinians as violent creatures, since it pathologises this violence rather than seeing it as a natural reaction to oppression.

Thus in order to engage in solidarity activism, we need to try to avoid the risk of continuing the interpellation of Palestinians by imperialist discourses. One way of doing so, Bradley argued is to compile a critical inventory of the self, such as Gramsci enjoined:

The starting point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is 'knowing thyself' as a product of the historical process to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory. Therefore it is imperative at the outset to compile such an inventory. (quoted in Said 1978, 25)

The importance of compiling such an inventory was amplified by the discussion of the Rossport Solidarity Camp by Donal O'Driscoll and Jerriann Sullivan. They discussed the problems with and the importance of international solidarity for the local campaign to resist the Shell Corrib Gas Project, for both the solidarity activists and locals in resistance. Since the Solidarity Camp was set up in 2005 between 6,000 and 10,000 people have travelled to the Erris peninsula in northwest Ireland to offer solidarity to the resisting community; among them have been a steady stream of activists from the UK. The strategy behind the

solidarity with a resisting community was to offer physical support, organisational experience and knowledge of protest tactics.

Relationships between solidarity activists and community campaigners living in Erris were shaped by the various social and cultural contexts of these different individuals, leading often to tensions. Experiences of solidarity activism differed not only between generations of solidarity activists at the Rosspport Solidarity camp but also between individual activists. This multivocality was illustrated by a short play staged by three Solidarity Camp activists. The play raised numerous issues such as the tension between remaining committed to a community led campaign and the temptation to act independently of that community during periods of low campaign activity; the difficulty in evaluating the success and impact of their actions; the meaning of community and who speaks for that community. Just as there is no perfect community, they resolved, there is also no perfect solidarity.

While long-distance activists may be able to ignore such problems, in the context of Rosspport where campers were living for long periods of time among a small community, these issues needed to be faced. The campers were not separated from the locals – for instance, part of the solidarity activism was working on farms of locals who had been arrested. The difficulty of relating to those they were in solidarity with was not simply a theoretical issue, but was practical and immediate as the solidarity activists from outside the area had to come to terms with their own colonial attitudes and make the Gramscian inventory that Elaine Bradley spoke of.

Donal O Driscoll's presentation dealt with this difficult process, and also how the long discussions served to change the activists. Rosspport happened at the end of the era of counter summit mobilisations and hit-and-run direct actions, with which English campaigners were becoming disillusioned. Rosspport provided them with an alternative way of conducting activism, and has led to direct action campaigners in Britain reshaping their politics around communities rather than simply around their own issues. Thus what Rosspport taught was the difficulty but also the value of exchange and communication in solidarity work, in order to build a culture of meaningful politics.

Final debate

The conference ended with a final workshop session which provided participants – many of whom had been working for years in solidarity organisations – with the space to analyse international solidarity practices and effects. Since we cannot take solidarity, as a word, at face value, it is necessary to analyse its multiple meanings, the need for critical engagement between the various subjects of solidarity. The debate also threw up discussions on how neoliberalism and interventionist doctrines have impacted how solidarity is perceived.

Some questions raised include: how do domestic political dynamics affect the aims and tactics adopted by solidarity movements? How do everyday politics

and prejudices between participants affect solidarity spaces? How do the politics of the people we are in solidarity with affect solidarity practices? How does solidarity manifest itself beyond North-South relationships (North-North, South-South, South-North)? How deep has been the impact of the IT revolution on relation to solidarity practices? How do other political agendas (states, donors, political parties) affect the practice of solidarity?

After the conference, the organisers (Hilary Darcy, José Gutiérrez and David Landy) have established an International Solidarity Research Network (ISRN). If you are interested in exploring these questions whether as an academic or as a practitioner we invite you to get in touch with us at solidarityresearchnetwork@atgmail.com and participate in this ongoing project.

References

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