

A Spinozist sort of solidarity: from homo-nationalism to queer internationalism

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Solidarity is usually understood as something expressed by one group or individual in relation to another. There is an argument to be made though that, both conceptually and politically, it might be more useful to think of solidarity in terms of *a consciously shared and affirmed identity or political project*.

Indeed, the affirmation of your own identity – whether this is “minoritarian” or “majoritarian”, in the qualitative rather than quantitative sense Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (2004, 518-519) used these terms – has in fact often meant an expression of solidarity with others who share this identity with you.¹ Take for example early gay liberation movements, where the act of “coming out” was supposed among other things to make life easier for other gays, lesbians and queers, even if it made your own life more difficult in some ways.

There are of course plenty of examples of shared identities being affirmed in the name of solidarity that have quite reactionary intentions or effects, however. In Britain, there is a trade union that calls itself “Solidarity – The Union for British Workers” and which “rejects the internationalism of existing trade unions”. It is “a nationalist union with the protection of British workers’ interests as the core of its agenda”.² Clearly, the idea of *international* solidarity was always meant to oppose initiatives like this. But it is worth noting that many critical or leftwing expressions of solidarity also entail certain dangers or at least ambivalences.

One of these is the reification of the identities they affirm, which can obscure their contingency – how, in other words, these identities are historically, culturally, socially and discursively constructed and specific – and involve a policing of boundaries. In order for gay, black, women’s and other liberation movements to be brought into being, there was often a clear need for solidarity to be expressed among those who shared these respective identities – all of which formed (and largely continue to form) the basis on which a subordinated position was established within a social hierarchy. But each of these movements

¹ “Majority”, for Deleuze and Guattari (2004, 116-117), “assumes a state of power and domination, not the other way around. It assumes the standard measure, not the other way around... A determination different from that of the constant will therefore be considered minoritarian, by nature and regardless of number”. As such, “the average adult-white-heterosexual-European-male-speaking a standard language (Joyce’s or Ezra Pound’s Ulysses)” often serves as such a “constant or standard”, despite the fact that “he is less numerous than mosquitoes, children, women... etc.” Likewise, “[w]omen, regardless of their numbers, are a minority” (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, 117).

² <http://www.solidaritytradeunion.org/about.html>

subsequently, and necessarily, became animated by their own internal debates around “essentialism”; not only in terms of the degree to which they “naturalised” categories that are socially produced, but also the extent to which they each – in different ways and to different degrees – tended to assume a white and/or male and/or middle class subject.³

Solidarity beyond identity

One of the most prominent feminist debates in the global North currently surrounds the politics of trans* and also touches on this question of essentialism.⁴ There is also often a tension that exists, particularly in international campaigns or research around trans* issues, about which identities become, or should be, “conflated” with one another – becoming commonly defined as “transgender”, for instance. What has already become subsumed beneath this signifier in some national, cultural, social or political contexts has not in others. In some cases there is a resistance to this subsumption; and in some, alternative terms are used, often with slightly different meanings.

The international dimension to solidarity, then, does not necessarily eliminate the dangers or ambivalences often at stake – indeed, it can further complicate things. Nor does a minoritarian subject position inoculate against reproducing modes of exclusion and subordination, or obstacles to solidarity. One of the dangers with recognising the difficulties involved in affirming common – class, gender, sexual or other – identities as a basis for solidarity, though, is falling back onto a liberal account of the subject, with a reticence towards any sort of “construction” of collective identity. The amenability of this to a neoliberal politics, and to an elimination of solidarity among those who certainly share a subjection to identity-based domination and violence, is clear.

This is where the question of a shared political project comes in. Donna

³ See for example the Combahee River Collective’s (1983 [1977]) “A Black Feminist Statement”.

⁴ The term “trans*” (with an asterisk) is used by some activists and theorists today to denote a greater range of gender variation than is often associated with “trans” (without an asterisk) or “transgender”, the latter of which in particular, as Avery Tompkins (2014, 27) has explained, “is now understood in some circles to represent only binary notions of transness and to refer only to trans men and trans women rather than those who contest the gender binary”. Although its use has not been without its critics, the asterisk has a number of different (even if often related) functions. Firstly, it sometimes stands in for any potential combination of characters that might follow the trans- prefix (transsexual, trans woman, trans man, and so on), similarly to how the asterisk functions as a so-called “wildcard character” in telecommunications and computing (Tompkins 2014, 26). Secondly, it can be used to “[draw] attention to the word” trans (Tompkins 2014, 27), particularly where it *requires* such attention (indicating something more complex than might initially be assumed), and also to resist its reduction to an afterthought in projects and initiatives that describe themselves as LGBT. Thirdly, it can sometimes “act as a footnote indicator,” similarly “implying a complication or suggesting further investigation” (Tompkins 2014, 27); although an actual footnote is in fact rarely appended, in effect allowing the asterisk to operate as a floating signifier.

Haraway (1991, 155-156) has been among those to have argued – quite convincingly, in my opinion – that it is entirely possible to construct shared identities “out of otherness, difference, and specificity” on the basis of what Chela Sandoval called “oppositional consciousness”: identities that mark out “a self-consciously constructed space that cannot affirm the capacity to act on the basis of natural identification, but only on the basis of conscious coalition, of affinity, of political kinship”, and, I would add, *solidarity*. Sandoval’s example of such an affinity- as opposed to identity-based category was “women of colour”, but the signifier “queer” has clearly long been used along these lines too, as more recently has “trans*” (with an asterisk).

Solidarity despite homo-nationalism

Particularly since September 11 2001, there has been an increasing attention among queer theorists and activists to what Jasbir Puar and others have called “homonationalism”. In her book, *Terrorist Assemblages*, Puar (2007, 2) describes this as a “form of national homonormativity”, which can refer to two things and is of course intended as a corollary to the notion of “hetero-normativity”: the generalised presumption and valorisation of heterosexuality. You are presumed heterosexual until – deliberately, accidentally, or even wrongly – you indicate otherwise.

The first sense in which *homo*-normativity has been used, by scholars like Jack/Judith Halberstam (1998, e.g. 139) and Susan Stryker (2008), is to name the ways many gay and lesbian contexts disparage, exclude or obscure what have been called “non-normative” gender expressions: a perceived “excessive” femininity in men or masculinity in women; or the articulation of trans*, gender-queer or other identities. The second sense is what Lisa Duggan (2003, 50) famously called “the new homonormativity”, namely, “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption”.

Homonationalism could be understood as combining, within a nationalist project, these two: a veneration or at least toleration of certain queer subjectivities (and an exclusion of others) as well as their deployment as a means of reinforcing or reproducing dominant institutions and mechanisms of power, while seeking to drain queer politics of its own transformatory potential. Puar theorises homonationalism in relation to Michel Foucault’s (e.g. 1978) account of biopolitics. It is not a top-down process, directed through policy or more traditional sovereign modes of power. Rather, it is enacted horizontally and bottom-up, through networks of institutions, actors, discourses, and from *within* disparate social subjects – including many queer subjects. Discussions of homonationalism have generally occurred in contexts not only defined by a veneration of heteronormative coupling and the subjugation of queer sexualities – although these still certainly take place – but also a simultaneous

“propagation”, in Puar’s (2007, 39) words, “of sexualities that mimic, parallel, contradict, or resist this normativity”. She describes an orientalism at work that disaggregates *some* queer subjects “from a racial and sexual other” in a way that feeds in to nationalist discourses of inclusion and exceptionalism (Puar 2007, 39).

“For contemporary forms of U.S. nationalism and patriotism,” she argues – and certainly similar arguments can and have been made in relation to homonationalism emerging from other contexts – “the production of gay and queer bodies is crucial to the deployment of nationalism, insofar as these perverse bodies reiterate heterosexuality as the norm but also because certain domesticated homosexual bodies provide ammunition to reinforce nationalist projects” (Puar 2007, 39).

Puar cites the post-9/11 proliferation of American flags in gay spaces, support for US military intervention by some conservative gays, as well as the ways certain “progressive and liberal discourses of LGBTIQ identity might unwittingly use, rely upon, or reinscribe U.S. nationalisms” (Puar 2007, 46). The response of some LGBTIQ movements and organisations to recent legislation in Russia criminalising so-called “gay propaganda”, however, has also included clear elements of homonationalism. In Berlin, one large demonstration in August 2013, intended as an articulation of queer international solidarity, prominently featured a banner that read, “*Deutschland gegen Homophobie*”, or “Germany Against Homophobia”. The national unit, in other words, was (at least discursively) mobilised in a way that both incorporated (certain) queer identities within German national identity while obscuring the very real existence of homophobia in Germany itself. The demonstration took place around the same time as Chancellor Angela Merkel’s own party, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), along with their Bavarian partner the CSU, were actively obstructing legislation that would allow same-sex couples to adopt.⁵

This kind of nationalist homonormativity, or the incorporation of queers within nationalist projects – and the *active* feeding into this process by queer subjects, movements and organisations themselves – is a real phenomenon, and it deserves the critical attention it is receiving by queer theorists and activists. But it poses a challenge to thinking and practicing queer international solidarity. There is certainly a danger of some crude approaches to homo-nationalism creating obstacles to queer-internationalism: wanting to avoid reproducing narratives that stress the lack of rights and experience of violence elsewhere, and concentrate instead on homo- and trans*phobia “at home”. This need not *necessarily* be the case, however. Avoiding incorporation within a homonationalist project, in the way people like Puar have described, and advancing a queer-internationalism requires careful political and intellectual work; and certainly, it should avoid retreat from the difficult, messy world of

⁵ <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/vorab/adoptionsrechte-fuer-homosexuelle-spd-kritisiert-merkels-nein-a-943029.html>

practice and politics and into that of critique.

Spinozist solidarity

It also seems to me that some of the dangers of falling into a homonationalist trap derive from a particular approach to thinking and doing solidarity. If the focus is on the misery of others, and you extrapolate an imperative to act out of your own (perhaps) relatively privileged situation, there is a greater likelihood of forgetting the (again *perhaps* less immediately violent) ways your own life is subjected to operations of power that inhibit your ability to shape and realise your desires, or live together with others in the ways you choose. We need a Spinozist sort of solidarity. Not a solidarity based on pity – i.e. “sadness which has arisen from injury to another” (Spinoza 1996 [1677], 166)⁶ – or compassion (which is just the habitual disposition towards pity [Spinoza 1996 [1677], 191]),⁷ but solidarity as a joyful affirmation of our own desire to live well, which is inextricably bound up (and quite rationally so) with a desire for others to live well too (Spinoza 1996 [1677], 209).⁸ Sadness, for Spinoza, is ultimately a relatively debilitating affection, with less political potential than the joy that can come from overcoming our solitude and deciding to embark on a common project that can benefit us all.

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⁶ Spinoza’s *Ethics*, IIP22S.

⁷ *Ethics*, DefAffXVIIIExp.

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