International Solidarity in Social Movements[1]
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Good morning. Thank you so much to the organizers for inviting me here to speak to you on international solidarity and social movements. From the program I can see that much of the focus of this conference will be on international labor solidarity, which is a much needed and important topic of discussion.

However, I am here to talk about international solidarity in social movements beyond the labor movement. Actually it's curious that within social movements studies the term international solidarity *per se* is not really discussed very much in the literature - with some important exceptions. Social movement scholars tend to talk about *transnationalism* not *internationalism,* and while solidarity is certainly something discussed within movements and within social movement scholarship, the international dimension or even the transnational dimension is not developed that much or that consistently.

I was asked to provide some existing definitions of international solidarity, so I will begin with these. One definition in a discussion of international solidarity is that of political altruism. This is defined by Florence Passy in a book called *Political Altruism? Solidarity movements in international perspective* as:

> ....a form of behavior based on acts performed by a group or/and on behalf of a group and not aimed to meet individual interests; it is directed at a political goal of social change or the redefinition of power relations; and individuals involved in this type of social change do not stand to benefit directly from the success deriving from the accomplishment of those goals. (2001:6)

According to this definition "Volunteer work and charity work does not count as political altruism if it does not engage in political claim making nor in social change."

I think that this definition, while very useful in some ways, is based on quite a rational actor model of human behavior with an instrumental understanding of gain and benefit. While I take the wider point, I believe solidarity practice *can* be tied to individual benefit directly, for example through individual identity work, with deep and meaningful senses of personal satisfaction and with a sense

of working to build a world in which all benefit, not just the victims of the oppression in question.

David Featherstone offers a different definition, which he then develops throughout his book *Solidarity: hidden histories and geographies of internationalism* (2012). He defines solidarity (in part) as

> a relation forged through political struggle which seeks to challenge forms of oppression.

Featherstone stresses the idea of solidarity as a transformative relation of practice, that can be forged from below or through pressure from without and in which working-class groups and social movements can play a key role. He also stresses the international dimension of solidarity, as well as the uneven power relations and geographies through which solidarity is constructed. And some of these are themes I also will develop in my talk.

I would like to step away now from these specific definitions in the literature on international solidarity and turn instead to some theoretical roots of solidarity. Marx, of course, was concerned with precisely the international form of solidarity between the working classes that I assume many people will be discussing here and you will all be very familiar with. So I will leave Marx aside and turn to someone who devoted a lot of energy to the concept of solidarity, but who, unlike Marx, was not precisely known for his radical politics, and this is Émile Durkheim.

Durkheim opposed two forms of solidarity, which he correlated with premodern and modern societies, and with two forms of communities: those based on shared characteristics of similarities and those based on heterogeneity or difference. The first type he called mechanical solidarity, found in closely knit traditional societies and based on similarities in experiences, beliefs, values and activities. If we apply this conception of solidarity to social movements we could think about the type of solidarity that arises in closely knit social movement groups based on close affinity where activists share values, goals, worldviews and direct experiences. This type of solidarity is instinctively easier to understand than the second type, which Durkheim called organic solidarity. Indeed, similarity is often thought to confer a sort of automatic solidarity. We hear this type of assumption in theories about working-class solidarity where class position confers solidarity or in feminism, for example, where sisterhood between women does the same thing.

But which similarity should confer the solidarity? We know, for example, that in the United States male solidarity trumped racial solidarity when black men were given the right to vote (1870) 50 years before women of any color (1920). And of course if we trace back discourse on voting rights we can see arguments that demand those rights for white women but did not extend those demands for women of color or conversely for upper class or educated women but not for working-class women and so on.

If solidarity based on similarity is problematic in modern society, with its complex cross-cutting identities and advanced division of labour, organic

solidarity, based on difference, is even more difficult to explain. And here Durkheim's theoretical challenge was to understand how it was that solidarity could be developed between people who no longer shared similar beliefs, similar values, similar activities and shared direct experiences. His solution was that in complex modern societies with a highly developed division of labor individuals became aware of their interdependence and were able to recognize the role that the other played in maintaining and developing the common good or modern society. The individual is sacred and seeks to develop their own unique qualities and skills, which are then complementary to those of others, yet no individual is self-sufficient but rather depends on others to meet their needs. And everyone is aware of that interdependence.

When we think about international solidarity and social movements the sort of challenge that Durkheim raises is still quite relevant and thought provoking. How is it that we develop a sense of solidarity with people with whom we may not have direct contact or share direct experiences, and who may differ from us in significant ways in terms of their belief systems, the types of work they do, or the type of activities they carry out in their daily lives, and even perhaps in their beliefs, and *even* perhaps in their values?

Modern theories of globalization and cosmopolitanism try to answer this question through arguing that increased contact with others brings an attendant reduction in differences, through, for example, processes of travel, migration, flows of goods, information and cultural codes etc. This theoretical trend points towards a world in which global civil society is emerging and becoming denser, and in which the state is diminishing in importance.

Global civil society theories also follow in this vein, with very Durkheimian notions of increased awareness of interdependence, shared global risks, and so on. Central to much work on global civil society is the belief that globalization processes – and, crucially, social movement actors – shape the development of a global consciousness that is aware of humanity's interdependence across complex system and connections.

Yet, when we think about international solidarity between social movements in the world today I think it's fair to say that stark and radical differences between the realities of the activists who are reaching out in solidarity to each other are still frequent.

It seems to me that social movements engaging in international solidarity face some important challenges worth reflecting on. In other words, how to feel and then practice solidarity with those who are geographically distant, whose beliefs and worldviews and life experiences may be quite different from one's own? Indeed, Durkheim has often been critiqued for failing to take account of important differences in power and resources between different sectors of society that are interdependent. The same challenges that he failed to address satisfactorily theoretically are faced in practice by social movement activists wanting to practice solidarity across borders or solidarity with people who *have*

crossed borders (e.g. migrants, immigrants, asylum seekers) into particular national contexts.

What are some of these challenges?

The disparity in resources between different parts of the world introduces a specific set of challenges. One key area of international solidarity, for example, has involved providing donations or other resources to grassroots organizations in countries different from the donor countries. As I argue in my book *Social Movements and Globalization* (2014), transnational–national–local linkages between formally constituted organizations are mediated by power and resource disparities between movements and international NGOs (INGOs), and by the geo-political and national political contexts in which social movements operate.

Evans (2000) highlights Keck and Sikkink's case study of rubber tappers in the Amazon in the 1990s (Keck and Sikkink, 1998: ch. 4) to show how they struggled to make their claims heard, not only because they were resource poor, did not have the access to local politicians that the local landowners did, and were subject to violent repression, but also because transnational environmental groups were seen as 'outsiders' (or even imperialists) interfering with 'national development goals' (Evans, 2000: 232). The accusation of being stooges or tools of Western imperial forces is a common one lobbed at social movement groups in non-Western developing countries, and has important implications for social movements and activists.

Social movement organizations who accept funding from Western organizations, even when they are NGO funding bodies unconnected to any state, run the risk of being tainted by association (as pro-Western); accused of being anti-nationalist, spies or foreign government agents; and/or having their activism delegitimized as being the work of 'foreign hands'. This can happen whether or not social movement groups actually have ties to foreign social movement organizations or NGOs.

In Egypt in 2011, the pro-democracy movement that participated in the January Uprisings with the twin demands of *ash-sha'b yurid isqaat an-nizaam* (the people want the downfall of the regime) and *'aish, horreya, adala igtema'eya* (bread, freedom, social justice) were accused by the military junta's authoritarian regime of engaging in plots propagated by foreigners ('foreign hands'), to destabilize Egypt ---an accusation initially echoed by the old guard leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood, despite the participation of their own (mostly younger) members in the revolutionary uprising (Teti and Gervasio, 2012). The regime also repeatedly attacked NGOs in a widely covered (primarily in state-controlled media) 'foreign funding debate', using ultra nationalistic language to accuse NGOs of receiving 'unauthorised foreign funding and/or operating without a licence' (Teti and Gervasio, 2012: 107). Teti and Gervasio point out, though, that a genuine foreign funding debate (as opposed to one fomented by the regime to foster hostility to social movement groups and delegitimize them) has been going on within social movement groups for many years. Activists are well aware of the risks or benefits associated with accepting

foreign or transnational funding.

The issues raised in these internal debates have been well-documented by Kapoor (2005) in his work on NGO partnerships with grassroots organizations in rural India. Kapoor argues that critical self-reflection is needed to avoid INGOs and NGOs from imposing their own agendas on grassroots organizations and abusing the unequal power relations between them.

Drawing on extensive fieldwork, Kapoor (2005: 211) highlights a number of problems with the ways that INGOs operate in India, which primarily stem from the fact that they tend to work through national NGOs rather than directly with grassroots organizations:

> When INGOs 'contract' large Indian NGOs to implement projects, these NGOs in turn subcontract the project work through the village level NGOs and or CBOs [community-based organizations] … This relationship is often fraught with problems ranging from petty corruption to outright domination, as 'activist' POs [people's organizations] are disabled, gutted, and tranquilized into a state of apathy and dependence on charity by the lure of temporary goods and services.

National and local NGOs often use funds earmarked for development projects for personal gain and to maintain patronage systems, 'cooking up' projects to secure international funding that do not benefit the grassroots supposed beneficiaries of these projects. These NGOs also use their power and funding to silence and de-radicalize grassroots organizations and to co-opt their leadership. Kapoor (2005: 215) argues that INGOs need to work directly with the grassroots if they actually want to benefit them, but he does so with some trepidation, given that such a move generally brings INGOs into direct contact 'with the vested interests [local power holders] that are often the very cause of problems faced by the marginalized and dispossessed'.

Activists in South Africa's *Abahlali baseMjondolo* shack dweller's movement are also continually being accused of being part of the 'Third Force', a racist accusation that denies agency to poor black people and constructs them as only being able to mobilize if manipulated by covert white elites. Recently, the movement unleashed a storm of controversy when it abandoned its long held nonpartisan stance (embodied in its slogan "No Land! No House! No Vote!") to support the Democratic Alliance in upcoming provincial elections, explaining that in the face of violent repression and worsening conditions, it felt that strategic voting was a necessary step (Brown 2014). Such sudden or important changes in political policy throws up another challenge for international solidarity—especially if those changes go against the principles of the groups offering the solidarity across borders. Solidarity groups must then rethink their own relationship with changing circumstances on the ground, which they may not be able to fully grasp or come to grips with due to insufficient information, competing narratives, or emerging factions within the movements they are hoping to support.

Activists in the global North are also affected by geo-political considerations when engaging in international solidarity activism. For example, some groups are accused of collaborating with 'terrorists' for engaging with or fundraising for

'revolutionary' movements, or movements that use armed struggle in other parts of the world. It is important to recognize that the political construction of what constitutes a terrorist group varies greatly depending on the political interests and/or ideological interests of those doing the defining. In many cases, yesterday's 'freedom fighters' are today's 'terrorists', and vice versa.

For example, the African National Congress (ANC), whose leader Nelson Mandela was imprisoned in South Africa for 27 years, is widely perceived as a movement of freedom fighters against apartheid in South Africa. Yet, their use of armed struggle is glossed over in retrospective discourse about their activities. Seidman (2001) points out that, throughout the 1980s, Amnesty International refused to take on the cause of Nelson Mandela or any South African prisoner belonging to the ANC because of their use of armed struggle. It should be said that movements also engage in great debates about the support of these organizations: a case in point is the debate in Spanish leftist circles as to whether or not the Columbian FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) should be considered a terrorist organization or a revolutionary social movement. Nevertheless, the accusation of supporting terrorism or engaging in it is a very effective means at states' disposal to repress and silence social movements engaging in international solidarity. As we can see, the practice of international solidarity comes up against very specific geo-political realities and challenges.

Cultural differences both real and discursively constructed raise another set of challenges. On the one hand we have the reality of the need for ideas, practices and demands originating from outside a given context to be culturally translated in order for them to adopted successfully. This is so whether we are talking about European activists adapting Zapatista discourses to Italy or Spain, for example, or activists appealing to universal human rights discourses in contexts where those narratives are not dominant. Thayer, for example, shows how women in the Brazilian group SOS Corpo (SOS Body) found the gender discourse imported from the transnational networks in which they were involved very inspiring but were unable to use it to full advantage in local organizing until they fused it 'with home-grown concepts of citizenship' (Thayer, 2000: 336).

Sometimes, despite the best efforts of social movement actors, diffusion does not take place: Wood (2010), for example, describes how the International Youth Camps developed at the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil between 2001 and 2005 did not diffuse successfully to its new site in Caracas, Venezuela. The *horizontalist* (non-hierarchical and deliberative forms of organization) identities and strategies associated with the youth camps were not translated to the new cultural and political context. Wood argues that the 'new users' of the horizontalist idea were not given time to deliberate on what was, for them, a new form of practice and to see how it might fit with their own local context. She highlights how aspects of the political field in Caracas, such as centralization and polarization, also made it difficult for this transition to take place. Other instances of diffusion have been more successful, as the spread of

Otpor! strategies for democratic reform to different national contexts shows, although not without contradictions, debate and controversy.

Reflexivity about the political and cultural realities of the people one wants to be in solidarity with therefore is crucial. A common enemy of progressive transformation, for example, are cultural relativism arguments. We hear this frequently when discussing patriarchy, whereby women's inequality or oppression is chalked up to cultural differences that should be respected. Criticism about these discourses enters into tensions with arguments about non-reflexive cultural imperialism.

When the issue is female genital mutilation, bride burning or child marriage, the battle lines seem easier to draw, but what about the recurrent debates over the use of the veil by Muslim women? Is the veil an identity marker or a symbol of oppression? Should it not be women who decide this for themselves? What if they are not allowed to decide this for themselves? Should there then be one set of criteria for women in contexts where they are free to choose and another for contexts in which they can't? Why can women wear a cross but not a veil? Who decides? And so on, and so on. These heated debates are an example of the tensions between respect for individual autonomy and critique of a universal or global patriarchal system that can be difficult to resolve, and around which people have strong opinions. Clearly cultural as well as political narratives play a large role in these debates, debates activists practicing international solidarity have to navigate and which can sometimes feel like a lose/lose situation.

Recently an organization called Survival International (2013) released a video[2] critiquing the sort of international "solidarity" that should be avoided at all costs, the kind that blindly charges in to help the poor downtrodden other, denying them the right to speak or decide, and forcing on them the solution to their problems, problems diagnosed by others, with solutions also designed from outside affected communities. In the video, helpful development agencies go in to save the rainforest and bring progress to the poor indigenous people, destroying the ecosystem and cultural and social fabric at the same time, rendering them dependent, alienated and bereft. While there is an element of satire and irony to the video, it prompts reflection on the construction of the other who must be helped. Far too often this trope flows in a global North-global South direction. On the other hand, sometimes the subaltern cannot speak, or at least cannot speak openly, and then international solidarity can take the form of giving voice to oppressions that cannot be voiced by those who are oppressed. But speaking "in the name of" inevitably brings a complex set of challenges and pitfalls.

Peter Waterman, who has written extensively about international global solidarity, reminds us of another problem that can arise in the flow of solidarity from the global North to the global South, which is a problem of mythmaking and rendering exotic iconic faraway figures:

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[2] http://www.survivalinternational.org/thereyougo

> The Western left, which would be cautious, skeptical or downright suspicious of any would-be icon in the north, still seems to need, as in the 19th century, its iconic figures, transformatory and transformed movements, its promised Islands and Highlands. And then to find them in faraway places with strange sounding names. And to endow them with the purity, simplicity, unity, purpose, and capacity that the Metropolitan left feels itself to lack... (2001 :xv)

Waterman reminds us that instead of romanticizing and exoticizing iconic faraway figures we need to understand them as friends, colleagues, comrades or partners. His discussion prompts us to reflect on the need to treat far away others with the same critical perspective and respect we would treat our close-by "similar "others. Another problem is the ease with which some activists recognize forms of oppression elsewhere that they fail to identify and act on in their own contexts, and patriarchy, sexism, elitism and racism are all examples of this.

In the face of these challenges, and many more, international solidarity practitioners adopt a wide range of strategies, which bring us back to this issue of similarity and difference.

On the one hand, activists stress the universality of issues and appeal to universal discourses such as human rights to make their claims. A recognition of shared common problems such as climate change or the threat of nuclear war, and recognizing our interdependence, not just the dependence of the global South on the global North, but crucially also the dependence of the global North on the global South, in terms of labor and resources, culture, etc. In so doing, these kinds of strategies pursue an emphasis on our similarities and our interdependence, which bring together both kinds of solidarity in the Durkheimian sense.

Yet as I hope my discussion so far has made clear, it is also necessary to bring in a discourse of differences, crucially differences in power, differences in resources, and a recognition of the very real differences in the political, social, and cultural contexts in which the international issues that we want to address unfold. For while the core and essence of human rights, for example, is universal, the reality of practicing gay rights in San Francisco or gay rights in Uganda is radically different; the reality of fighting against women's oppression in Germany and fighting against that oppression in Yemen or Saudi Arabia is again very different.

International solidarity, it seems to me, must rest on reflexivity about our similarities and our differences, on the relation and tension between the universal and the particular, on a recognition of the other as different but equal, and on transcending a rational actor rational discourse model to keep an awareness of power relations and resource disparities at the center of our thinking and practice, as well as the ways cultural narratives are used to obscure and challenge those disparities.

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