Solidarity forever?
Performing mutual aid in Leipzig, Germany
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Introduction

The global pandemic COVID-19 not only started a discussion on the crisis of health systems around the world, it also brought a discourse on solidarity to the fore. The World Health Organization (WHO) called on global solidarity. Asking for donations for a Solidarity Response Fund, the WHO has named its clinical trial "solidarity". European solidarity meant treating some French and Italian patients in German hospitals (also in Leipzig) but economic aid is still debated controversially. The German Chancellor Angela Merkel said that "since the Second World War, there has not been a challenge for our country in which action in a spirit of solidarity on our part was so important" (Address to the nation, March 18, 2020).

The political discourse on solidarity remained poor in content, mainly restricted to issues of charity; more significantly, this discourse continued to be largely detached from existing discussions and practices of social movements and the Left.

As a scholar on social movement democracy and an activist scholar working on neighbourhood relations, we are curious about the political and transformative potential of solidarity in action during this crisis. Hence, we analyse different initiatives of mutual aid during the pandemic in our city. In Leipzig, a city of 600,000 in Eastern Germany, the number of infections are relatively low (about 600 cases in May 2020) but the social consequences are enormous. On March 17 all public events were banned and a week later an almost complete lockdown came into effect. It was partially lifted on April 20 and public life re-opened with restrictions on May 4. The right to protest and assemble was banned for most of the time.

We first give a short overview of concepts of solidarity, providing a lens to analyse the mutual-aid groups. Second, we discuss six cases with differing political backgrounds and organizational set ups. We wanted to capture their experience during the crisis and their analytical and practical conceptualizations of solidarity.[1]

Three types of solidarity

In this section, we present three types of solidarity to guide our empirical findings. Even if we cannot review the rich discourse on solidarity here, we outline some important variations.[2]

Solidarity as (or based on) shared identity has been recently criticized as exclusive, explicitly in the context of COVID-19 (August, 2020). The critique relies on perspectives of Richard Sennett, who since his early writing condemned community solidarity as a purification tool neglecting differences in a shared 'we' (Sennett, 1973). Yet others interpret shared identities as less fixed, highlighting merely a necessity of shared experience for collective identification and solidarity (Mühe, 2019), or, even more radically pluralist, use feminist theories to define solidarity as an attachment possible despite or even *because* of difference (Bargetz, et al. 2019).

August (2020) is equally critical on **solidarity as compassion and a moral duty**, its disregard leading to sanctions. This evokes a kind of Durkheimian notion of pre-modern solidarity. Nuss' (2020) take on solidarity as compassion is less judgemental, framing it as taking responsibility for one another.

Finally, **solidarity as political practice** is the perspective, we, as critical scholars and activists have worked most with so far. It is defined as a relation of a shared struggle against oppression (Featherstone, 2012), a struggle for the same goals, positioned against something or someone specific (Nuss, 2020) or, on more universalist terms, based on an analysis of a concrete universalism implying that all are concerned differently by the same oppressive society (Adamczak, 2018; Meißner, 2016; Mühe, 2019; Struwe, 2019).

As we show below, these different variations help to analyse the differences of the mutual-aid groups in Leipzig.

Please, let me help you: six cases of solidarity

Witnessing the popping up of solidarity initiatives, both by existent and newly forming groups in Leipzig, and following their trajectories, the first impression is that all are doing the same thing: they are encouraging mutual help with practical daily life tasks complicated either through the virus itself (for those with highest risk) or the respective measures. Another commonality is that relatively few people use their services. The differences lie in the ideological framework, the organizational philosophy, the target groups, and the time horizon of action. We discuss these differences alongside the aforementioned conceptualizations of solidarity.

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[2]On the non-fixity of the concept, its contested nature and permanent need for reconstruction see Wallaschek, 2019; Bargetz, et al. 2019 or Mühe, 2019. For a recent discussion of exclusive and inclusive/transversal forms of solidarity in the context of migration see Schwiertz and Schwenken, 2020.

Solidarity based on shared identity

One initiative in particular has grown out of a shared identity: the legal-help collective of the local soccer club *BSG Chemie*, which was formed in 2014 as a response to harsh police brutality towards fans and ultras. When their work slowed down in the face of COVID-19, they thought "what can we do, we are quite an organized group, have a network, how can we use it?"[3] Their aim was "to come out of the crisis strengthened, initially the idea was for the Chemie fans." Asked what solidarity means, the interview person laughs and says "of course it means that we are there for one another within the fan-scene [...] and support one another."

Providing their infrastructure for a helpline, setting up chat groups and drafting flyers for neighbourhood mutual help, they were quickly discovered by the local public health department. It was the pragmatic cooperation with this department that provided them with their only help requests. Adapting to the situation, their focus shifted, "it got a bit more global, throughout the whole city and outside of the scene." Their highlight was supporting a financially precarious family in quarantine and organizing Easter presents for the kids: their large network gathered such a massive lot of presents, that they redistributed it to several refugee shelters and the local food bank.

They were not discouraged by the low demand ("we are happy if a majority stays healthy"), but have adapted their work through, for example, encouraging blood donations which went down in the pandemic and asking people to donate the remuneration to food banks or the local women's shelter "because through our big network we just reach many folks."

Therefore, even if grown out of and based on a strong shared identity as soccer fans, their solidarity quickly became more universal and supportive of all those in need they could identify. Their solidarity is shaped by compassion: "in the fan-support we simply like to support people and [...] have an inner drive to do so", but also a political critique. Besides their pragmatic mutual help, they continued critical evaluation of state measures "we also wrote texts on how to deal with constraints of freedom and observe many policing measures critically."

Solidarity as compassion

The group *Nachbarn für Nachbarn* (Neighbours for Neighbours) operates in the quarters Schleußig and Plagwitz, the former being of Leipzig few central middle-class neighbourhoods and the latter becoming one too. The group did not exist before the Corona crisis and was initiated through an individual's appeal in an online social network. Its members set up a Telegram chat group for coordinating help and a phone line as an access point. The service was made public mainly through flyers. The main target group are the elderly who they identified in accordance with the public authorities as those who need help most. The group

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[3]The interviews were conducted in German. All quotes were translated by the authors.

responded to an estimated eight requests so far and at least in one case the help for grocery shopping lasts until today. Despite low numbers of requests they will continue their work because they want to be ready for further expected waves of mass infections.

The intention of the group can be characterized as offering help without political attachments.

Friedrich, one of the two interview partners, stressed that they do not want to create a formalized organizational structure or engage in political activities. They decided against social media activity, arguing that it is too time-consuming. Similarly, the group sees internal discussions as detrimental to the organization of help. As Friedrich explains, the group has about 30 members and they practice a form of direct democracy where decisions are taken by majority vote in a Telegram chat group.

Their solidarity can be characterized as a form of compassion or felt responsibility for people in need. The two interview partners pointed out that their Christian world-view is a source of motivation but this is not generalizable for the group which they characterized as being diverse. They want to avoid labels in order to be as open and approachable as possible and to avoid in-group conflicts. When asked about the term solidarity, Friedrich said that the core idea of solidarity is to help the needy, which he sees as their source of motivation. However, they do not use the term because it is used by other groups in Leipzig and because of its socialist legacy. Charity, altruism and a moral duty to help are more accurate to describe the group's ideational framework than solidarity.

The non-political setup of the group did not save them from a significant conflict. The initiator of the group, who saw himself as a leading figure, started posting political messages and became involved in the organization of protests against the government restrictions. These protests are associated with the new right and conspiracy theory. At first, the group tried to discipline his activity within the group, without excluding him. But when he did not follow their request to abstain from political postings in the group, tried to obtain a leadership role, and when the group became associated with his political activities by the public, the members decided to create a new group under a new name and thus excluded the initiator from its ranks. The conflict within this group can be understood as reflecting the growing polarization within the broader population itself around the issue of restrictions and their appropriateness. Interestingly, this conflict, both within the group and within the broader society, is not between the left and the right but rather between the political mainstream and the new right.

Whereas this group does not want to be a vehicle for social change and its temporal horizon is the pandemic, the following groups aim in different ways at transforming society.

Solidarity as political struggle for transforming society

The foundation *Ecken wecken* (Awaking Corners, https://stiftung-ecken-wecken.de/) is located in the Western part of Leipzig but offers help city-wide. Similar to other initiatives, they set up a help platform and a phone line. Specific here is that they use professional software (constituent-relationship management, as it is called in the non-profit sector) to coordinate help efficiently. On May 20, 2020 they counted 1,115 supporters and had answered 225 calls for help since they started on March 15, 2020.

The foundation pursues a collaborative approach towards local politicians and bureaucracy to implement projects for community development. They can be located in the tradition of a reformist way of community organizing which has roots in the US civil rights movements and has been introduced to Germany more than 10 years ago (see e.g. Penta, 2007). At the same time, they also market their solution for mutual aid to other organizations and cities in Germany. This situates them closer to the field of NGOs in development aid which often provide model solutions that are marketable.

The foundation's work during COVID-19 can be classified as charity (just like that of many other, also more radical left groups) and solidarity is not an explicit concept that they use. Yet their long-term goal has a transformative dimension. Similarly to many other initiatives in the world, they seek to democratize representative democracy by strengthening political agency through increased citizen participation in the existing political system (Fiedlschuster, 2018, p. 245; see also Fung and Wright, 2003; Santos, 2005).

Whereas *Ecken wecken* seeks moderate social change and aims at becoming recognized by the local authorities and politicians, the next group set up a state-independent redistributive system.

Direct.support Leipzig (https://leipzig.directsupport.care/en/), which is modelled after groups in Berlin and Halle, connects people with money with people in a financial crisis. They set up a simple way of redistributing money: someone, who self-identifies as needing money urgently (they do not restrict help to but explicitly encourage people who are exposed to structural discrimination), contacts the group. The group organizes what they call 'bidding rounds' among the supporters in a Telegram group to collect the money, which is then directly transferred from the supporters to the person in need. They started at the beginning of April, 2020, have around 100 supporters and helped about 17 people. The process is as anonymous as possible to protect the people in need, which raises the question of how to establish long-term exchanges and how to go beyond a mere monetary redistribution. Nevertheless, they try to fill a gap in the allocation of state-run emergency funds, which are inaccessible for some.

The group has not had the time (yet) to discuss a common understanding of solidarity. Whereas for the one interview partner the charity aspect and their involvement in other initiatives of solidarity economy seemed to be the motivation to take action, the other interview partner stressed that being solidaristic involves being against social injustices and questioning own privileges. *Direct.support Leipzig* sees solidarity as a political practice connected

with an anti-capitalist critique and their long term goal is to promote the idea of redistribution in general and not only during crises.

A similarly radical transformative approach characterizes the work of two initiatives in Leipzig's East. One of them is a Telegram chat group *Leipzig Ost Solidarisch* (Leipzig East Solidary) with 860 members, set up by three friends, self-identifying as "politically engaged people" who adapted their activism to COVID-19 and the restrictions which accompanied it. Initially they wanted to coordinate neighbourhood mutual help especially for people in high risk of COVID-19, but being confronted with the difficulty to reach those in need, the group served mainly as a platform for sharing information material. This ranged from inspirational leaflets from groups in other cities to comics for explaining COVID-19 to kids, and flyers with hotlines about domestic violence. Once the group shared a call for volunteers from the food bank and "shortly after we posted it, the food banks contacted us and told us to immediately stop sending people, they were being flooded by help-offers". Also, an initiative for Gabenzäune (gift-fences) grew out of the group. Its volunteers arrange different material donations for homeless people in a given public space.

The problem of reach did not discourage them but "made us question how political work can better reach those people it refers to." For the organizers, solidarity is "unconditional mutual support based on a perceived form of injustice, and it is not limited to any group membership, except maybe certain political attitudes." This probably refers to far right or racist attitudes.

They quickly established a cooperation with friends from another initiative we interviewed, the Poliklinik. With a core group of 15-20 people from different medical and social professions, this "solidary medical centre" was supposed to open right when COVID-19 started to spread in Germany. Their idea is "that you can only change health via social conditions - we think that social determinants make you sick, like housing conditions, working conditions, racism." Therefore, they explicitly chose the neighbourhood Schönefeld as their area of activity a location because people here are maybe more marginalized than for example in Schleußig."

First being resigned about the interruption of their work through COVID-19, they quickly established a specific COVID-19 task force preparing neighbourhood action through a phone line, the organization and distribution of self-made masks and the distribution of information material about the governmental restrictions, translated to many different languages. Our interview partner explains: "We want to support solidary neighbourhood help, so people get empowered, especially in times of such intense isolation, also people without internet or who don't speak German fluently, […] so they don't suffer even more, […] we want to build structures and simultaneously utter our criticism, because we are now doing the work, that should actually be done by the state."

Whilst receiving many support offers, their assessment was that "like in all other groups" they were in touch with, demand for help was quite low. They distributed flyers extensively in the neighbourhood, yet "especially elderly people sometimes

eye us critically, this new left wing project, and maybe, I'm not sure, people in need sometimes find it even harder to accept help […] or it's simply distrust. Or maybe people already have good support structures." Yet, they were happy to have done so much publicity work and astonished at the positive feedback they received, especially by employees of refugee shelters for the translation of information.

Similarly as in the other groups, "what remains is the question of how you reach people." Replying to the question about solidarity, the interviewee says: "generally we work against an unjust system, where the responsibility is dumped off onto the individual. But of course we're changing that on a small scale, we won't manage to change the whole system - unfortunately (laughs)."

To sum up, whereas *Ecken wecken* hopes for reforms in the established political system of representative democracy, the remaining three groups (*direct.support Leipzig, Leipzig Ost Solidarisch, Poliklinik*) have a radically transformative perspective on solidarity, interpreting their mutual-aid work as a tool within a wider struggle against oppression and social injustice.

Outlook

The population reached by all groups that we interviewed remains low. However, their work may be very important to cater to specific people in need, be this the affluent elderly in Schleußig or the manifold precarious workers who cannot momentarily pay their bills (direct support). Beyond this commonality, our preliminary analysis of a selection of mutual aid in Leipzig[4] revealed important differences in the political dimensions of their work.

Mapping the groups along different types of solidarity reveals their temporal and political horizons, but also allows to capture the shifting nature of solidarity in action. Whereas the base of a shared identity for solidarity in action seems obvious coming from a specific soccer club, their support work became more inclusive and reached a plurality of people. Meanwhile, a shared identity is not an outspoken base for any of the other group's work, yet their very different political characters stand in an interesting relation to their location in the city. The non-transformative form of solidarity based on compassion arose in one of Leipzig's wealthiest neighbourhoods, the reformist-transformative one in a quite gentrified area and the explicitly radically-transformist ones in the poorer East of the city where living costs are (still) lower. It is especially these neighbourhoods, where often financially precarious (yet mostly middle class) left wing activists have moved in the last years. The city's South, in contrast, while quite expensive, holds the longest left-wing tradition and is the base of many of the explicitly left-wing soccer fans. These observations raise the question, to what extent there is an undiscussed shared (class) identity, or at least a common experience of one's

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[4]Of course there are more than these six initiatives, which were not covered due to time and reach constraints.

location in the city, and therewith society (Joseph, 2002) at the base of some of the groups' work and horizon of social change.

To what extent any of their work is not just immediately charitable and efficient, but also sustainable or maybe even transformative for the city's social and political life remains to be seen and will depend crucially on the reach and therewith the relationships these groups manage to build within the local population.

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