

# **Solidarity, diversity and social justice**

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in *The Strains of Commitment.*  
*The Political Sources of Solidarity in Diverse Societies*  
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“What types of political institutions, policies and discourses serve to sustain or to erode solidarity in contexts of diversity?” This is, Keith Banting and Will Kymlicka write in their introduction, the motivating question of this volume. I live in a city that is home to over one third of foreign nationals and to another third of citizens of recent foreign origin. I also believe in the great importance of solidarity. Hence my intense interest in the question above and in the many answers to be found in this extremely instructive volume.<sup>1</sup> In this epilogue, I shall not summarize all I learned from it and from the conference that led to it. Instead, I shall briefly state how I think about solidarity and its relationship to social justice.<sup>2</sup> And I shall explain how this leads me to walk a long way along the path which Banting and Kymlicka invite us to follow, in both research and action, but also to tread a different path, the importance of which is bound to grow as diversity increases.

### **Solidarity as counterfactual reciprocity**

To my continental-European ears, the term “solidarity” does not cover the first two aspects of solidarity discussed in this volume: “civic solidarity” or mutual tolerance and “democratic solidarity” or support for equal basic rights. But it definitely covers “redistributive solidarity”. The French term “solidarité” was quite current long before it spread to other languages.<sup>3</sup> It is being used mainly to denote three distinct concepts. Firstly, it can refer to an objective situation of mutual dependence, to the “de facto solidarity” of people stuck in the same boat or countries stuck with the same currency. Secondly, it can refer to some feelings, attitudes, dispositions, motives that lead to actions that benefit others. And thirdly it can refer to some institutions that transfer resources from some people to others. In this note, I shall focus on these two last senses of

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<sup>1</sup> This question at the core of a conference I organized in Brussels in 2003 with the participation of several contributors to the present volume (see Van Parijs ed. 2004) and some of the answers I found for it keep motivating some of my present engagements (see especially [www.marnixplan.org](http://www.marnixplan.org) and [www.rethinkingbelgium.eu](http://www.rethinkingbelgium.eu)).

<sup>2</sup> See Van Parijs (1995, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> In the graphs provided by [books.google.com/ngrams](https://books.google.com/ngrams), the 0, 001 mark was reached by the French “solidarité” around 1850, by the Italian “solidarietà” around 1890, by the Spanish “solidariedad” around 1905, by the German “Solidarität” in 1950 and by the English “solidarity” only in 1980.

solidarity — motivational and institutional — and their relationship with each other and with social justice.

As a motive for benefiting others, solidarity can usefully be characterized as located between insurance and charity. It differs from the insurance motive in being irreducible to individual self-interest. It differs from the charitable motive in being symmetrical. The insurance motive can be understood as probabilistic reciprocity: "I help you, now that you are in trouble, because that will make you help me later if and when I shall be in the same trouble." The solidarity motive can be understood as counterfactual reciprocity: "I help you now that you are in trouble because you would have helped me had I been in the same trouble, and this even if I know that this will never be the case." This symmetry, essential to solidarity, is absent from the charity motive. But it does not rest on a mutually advantageous insurance contract, explicit or implicit. It rests on the assumption of a common identity: "I do this for you because you are one of us and because therefore you would also do this for me if our situations were swapped."

A parallel contrast can be drawn to characterize solidarity in the institutional sense. As clearly expounded by Juan Luis Vives in his *De Subventionem Pauperum* (1526), public assistance was born and developed as a more efficient way of organizing charity. And as succinctly outlined by Condorcet in his *Esquisse d'une histoire des progrès de l'esprit humain* (1795), social insurance was born and developed as a way of using probabilities to enable workers to protect themselves, in their own interest, against the risks they all run. Social insurance, *stricto sensu*, involves no *ex ante* redistribution, only *ex post* redistribution. Some people turn out to be net beneficiaries and other net contributors of the scheme, but they do not know in advance which of these two categories they will belong to. Nonetheless, as in any form of insurance, they all benefit from the greater security. However, as explained for example by Peter Baldwin in his *Politics of Social Solidarity* (1990), so-called social insurance systems gradually involved more and more *ex ante* redistribution. The uniform funding of health risks that are known in advance to be unevenly distributed, the imposition of floors and ceilings to earnings-related unemployment benefits and old age pensions and other features of contemporary welfare states have turned the latter into institutions of solidarity, i.e. of counterfactual reciprocity, not only of probabilistic reciprocity.

### **Sustainable institutional solidarity**

How can institutional solidarity so characterized develop and be made sustainable? Solidarity in the first sense of interdependence can certainly help. If how well you thrive depends on how well others in your neighborhood thrive, even your self-interest will recommend that you should not be too petty: *ex ante* redistribution away from you may turn out to return a net benefit. Even more certainly, solidarity in the second sense of a disposition towards counterfactual reciprocity will facilitate the expansion and sustainability of a welfare state that

transcends social insurance. The more the members of a political community are bonded by feelings of solidarity, the easier it will be to garner political support for the creation, preservation and development of ex-ante redistributive institutions that cover a wide variety of risks.

Can political action affect the conditions that favor or undermine sustainable institutional solidarity? Certainly, and many examples are discussed throughout this volume. Such political action can take the form of measures that increase mutual dependence, “*solidarité de fait*”, as was intended, for example, by the Coal and Steel Community *pace* Jean Monnet. It can also endeavour to strengthen a common identity through nation-building rhetoric and thereby foster solidarity feelings among those who share it. In addition, deliberate political action can promote the creation, preservation and development of institutionalized solidarity directly, without passing through solidarity in either the objective or the motivational sense. It can consist in bottom-up class struggle on behalf of those who stand to gain from solidarity. It can also consist in top-down Bismarck-type institutionalization of solidarity in order to strengthen national unity. Moreover the prospects for sustainable solidarity can be affected unwittingly, for example as a by-product of the development of trustworthy, corruption-free public institutions, of measures that reduce primary income inequality (and thereby the ex-ante redistribution required by institutionalized solidarity), or of political designs that confer veto power to the representatives of social or territorial categories that comprise particularly high proportions of net beneficiaries.

### **The challenge of diversity**

These various patterns are illustrated throughout the contributions to this volume. However, the latter’s central question — or at least the part of this question I wish to address in this note — is about the impact on solidarity, both motivational and institutional, of ethnic diversity, i.e. of a diversity of race, religion, language and culture that tends to be perpetuated intergenerationally. This issue has grown increasingly salient in Europe, for two distinct reasons. One is that, over the last decennia, a number of relatively homogeneous countries, including some of those with the highest level of institutionalized solidarity, have become increasingly heterogeneous as a result of high levels of immigration. The other is that, as a consequence of economic globalization and above all of the deepening of the European single market, the sustainability of national-level ex ante redistribution is called into question and therefore the possibility of institutionalized solidarity needs to be explored at a supra-national, unavoidably more heterogeneous level. If diversity has a negative impact on motivational solidarity and, thereby, on the sustainability of institutionalized solidarity, those who attach great importance to the latter have every reason to be concerned.

Why should one expect there to be a negative impact? Fundamentally because, unlike charity or insurance, solidarity in the motivational sense rests on

the assumption of a common identity. As explained above, it amounts to a sort of counterfactual reciprocity that can be expressed as follows: "I do this for you now that you are in trouble because you are one of us and because therefore you would also do this for me if I was the one in trouble." Other things equal, the more diverse the community concerned, the weaker this fellow-feeling and therefore the assumption required for acting out of solidarity. Motivational solidarity must not be confused with institutional solidarity but it affects the achievability and sustainability of the latter in two ways: through the general support for ex ante redistribution in the population and electorate as a whole, and through the cohesion and fighting capabilities of the groups that have most to gain from this redistribution. If diversity undermines motivational solidarity, the prospects for sustainable institutional solidarity would be weakened through these two channels.

Some of the empirical result reported and analyzed in this volume provide empirical support for this conjecture, but certainly not all. The apparent contradictions stem in part from variations in the choice of indicators for both diversity and institutional solidarity. They also stem in part from the fact that the effect of diversity on motivational solidarity may differ significantly depending on the type of diversity (recent or established, religious or linguistic, refugees or economic migrants, high-skilled or illiterate), on the fine grain of the redistributive institutions (cash or in-kind, workfare or welfare) and on various contingent features of the context (labor shortage or unemployment, electoral system, type of popular press, etc.). And they also result, as persuasively argued in several contributions to this volume, from the role played by the many determinants of institutional solidarity other than motivational solidarity that may mitigate, neutralize or more than offset the decline in motivational solidarity induced by greater diversity.

## **Two strategies**

Nonetheless, if there is such a negative impact on motivational solidarity and if the latter helps strengthen institutional solidarity, those who care about genuinely redistributive institutions should not be too complacent. What should they do? Two main things, in my view. One consists, as consistently advocated by Banting and Kymlicka, in developing and popularizing an inclusive and hence territorial (as opposed to ethnic) identity. Such an identity is one that expresses respect for diverse cultural traditions and encourages the transmission of all languages, one that roots the fellow feeling in the place where one has chosen to live rather than in a common ancestry, one that gains strength in a collective effort to make that place a better place, not least by developing countless public spaces where all components of the population can meet and interact, one that does not deny the challenge posed by diversity but untiringly insists that this challenge comes along with unprecedented opportunities. Starting from the local level, one can so hope to create and constantly recreate a municipal patriotism, an urban fraternity, a sort of fellow feeling that may remain more fragile and

shallow than a strong sense of national belonging but may still be sufficient to help sustain the sense of an “us” required by motivational solidarity and therefore most welcome for the stability of institutional solidarity.

The second thing that needs doing is develop and popularize a sense of fairness that can support genuine redistribution without appealing to counterfactual reciprocity and the shared identity it supposes. When Thomas Paine, in *Agrarian Justice*, argues for a universal basic endowment or a universal basic pension to be funded out of a rent on land, or when climate justice activists plead for a high carbon tax with proceeds to be distributed worldwide, they are demanding redistribution, on grounds of justice, not of charity — nor of solidarity.<sup>4</sup> Solidarity, like insurance, is always a matter of risk compensation, of the lucky helping the unlucky. There is none of this in the fair distribution of the value of land or of the value of the digestive capacity of our atmosphere. The justice that is here being appealed to is not a matter of helping those in trouble and has no need to presume that the one we help, being one of us, would have done the same for us. Justice is not reducible to solidarity.

There is no reason why this sense of justice should be restricted to the distribution of natural resources. What social justice requires is that all resources should be distributed in a way that can be justified to people who regard themselves and each other as free and equal persons.<sup>5</sup> This takes us in the direction of equality of opportunities, or life chances or real freedom, which is not the same as helping those in need, even out of solidarity rather than out of charity. In this light, the key condition we must try to realize is not a common identity sufficiently strong to trigger feelings of solidarity. It is rather a public space in which those holding power or aspiring to do so are forced to justify their policies and proposals to all those affected. What is needed is a justificatory community, a set of people who are called upon, directly or through their representatives, to justify whatever inequalities prevail between them, rather than a community united by common sympathies.

This important distinction does not invalidate Banting and Kymlicka’s view that solidarity “is important not so much for its intrinsic value, as a component of individual flourishing or a virtuous life, but for its functional role in motivating

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<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Anderson (2015) rightly stresses the novelty of Paine’s approach relative to the Poor Laws’ charity perspective, but misleadingly assimilates his approach to the one represented by the development of social insurance systems. For a clear characterization of the three forms of social security (there termed “social assistance”, “social insurance” and “basic income”), see, for example, Atkinson (2015: 206-9).

<sup>5</sup> This amounts essentially to satisfying John Rawls’s “criterion of reciprocity”, which “requires that, when terms are proposed as the most reasonable terms of social cooperation, those proposing them must think it at least reasonable for others to accept them, as free and equal citizens, and not as dominated or manipulated or under pressure caused by an inferior political or social position” (Rawls 1999: 14). Despite what the choice of the term may suggest, nothing in this definition establishes a conceptual link with reciprocity understood as a quid pro quo, albeit only counterfactual.

compliance with the demands of justice.” What follows from solidarity with those in trouble often leads to a fairer distribution of life chances, and conversely. What is being challenged, however, is their list of instruments available to make our institutions more just. Inclusive solidarity is needed, they contend, to sustain just institutions because “just institutions cannot be built or sustained solely through strategic and partisan contestation or through unbounded humanitarianism”. Next to the mobilization of those most unjustly treated and to more or less spontaneous feelings of solidarity, there is not just “unbounded humanitarianism”. There is also the operation, admittedly always imperfect and messy, of deliberative democracy, that is, of the civilizing force of hypocrisy.<sup>6</sup> With public spaces, oppositions, media, NGOs, academics, whistle blowers and all the rest doing their jobs not too badly, we can hope that the pressure of justifiability will help along demands of justice even under conditions in which enhanced diversity fragilizes solidarity — that is under conditions that will increasingly prevail as migration keeps happening and as decisions increasingly need to be taken above the national level.

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<sup>6</sup> To use Jon Elster’s (1998) apt formulation of the core of a deliberative democracy.