

THE PRINCIPLE OF SOLIDARITY

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The right-wing populist project of people like Trump is, on the one hand, the very opposite of everything the left stands for and defends. It is racist, sexist, anti-worker, and xenophobic. On the other hand, however, it takes pains to present itself as a kind of successor to the left: a new force to defend the downtrodden worker against the rich and powerful elites of Washington and Wall Street. In one of his early executive orders, for instance, Trump expressed a commitment “to create higher wages ... for workers in the United States, and to protect their economic interests.” In a White House policy statement, couched in anti-Establishment rhetoric, Trump is depicted as the only force willing to stand up to economic and political elites: “For too long, Americans have been forced to accept trade deals that put the interests of insiders and the Washington elite over the hard-working men and women of this country.”

It is easy to point out the hypocrisy and cynicism, to say nothing of the veiled racism, of these populist appeals to workers, and their superficial denunciations of nameless insiders and elites. What's harder to acknowledge is the left's own role in allowing this rhetoric to gain a foothold, by failing to offer to the wider multiracial working class a credible, potent form of authentically anti-Establishment, pro-worker politics, founded on solidarity and equality. But this lack – the absence of a potent left force to attack the Establishment and defend vulnerable workers' livelihoods from the relentless neo-liberal onslaught – is not rooted in indifference to the fate of workers or a disavowal of the responsibility to resist. Instead, it is rooted in real challenges to building solidarity, challenges posed in large part by antagonisms and inequities – the privilege of some, the marginalization of others – that pervade what would have to be the social base of any left-populist resurgence: the 99 per cent, in George Jackson's now-famous formulation (Jackson 1972, 9).

The divisions and antagonisms within the 99 per cent are nothing new, of course. Marx's call for workers of the world to unite was not a description of an already-reliable solidarity; it was an exhortation to embrace solidarity as a way forward for the left. Since the nineteenth century, the principle of solidarity – “an injury to one is an injury to all” – has been widely understood to express the basic norm of trade unionism. Yet many of us would go further, regarding the principle as crucial for all projects in which people try to liberate themselves from exploitation and oppression through struggle, including feminism, anti-racism, and anti-colonialism. The problem is, we're not always sure what “solidarity” means. I want to address this question by considering a parable that I think can clarify both the left's present predicament and how solidarity can help.

Imagine that a passenger jet is carrying two hundred passengers. Two of the passengers have used makeshift knives to commandeer the plane. Call them the 1 per cent. Their intention is to use their position of power over the other passengers, the 99 per cent, to extract money and compliance under the threat that non-compliant passengers will be penalized in various ways, such as by being denied adequate food or a decent place to sit. Conversely, they offer passengers who don't make trouble and help the hijackers out in various ways some special advantages, including extra comforts and more freedom to move around. We can call the penalized passengers “the worse off” and the rewarded passengers “the better off.” It occurs to many of the passengers that even two armed hijackers could easily be overpowered by the combined force of 198 others, or even a substantial segment of them. And yet, the great majority of passengers make no attempt to challenge the hijackers. Why not?

Are they too comfortable? Do they have too much to lose? Maybe. But even if this explanation rings true for the better-off passengers, who get special advantages, we would still need to explain why the less-advantaged members of the 99 per cent are *also* reluctant to rebel.

It is no mystery, surely. This is a “collective action problem.” This occurs whenever the action that would be most advantageous to a group of people, *were they to cooperate with one another*, is disadvantageous to each of them individually *in the absence of such cooperation*. It would be advantageous to attack the hijackers only if enough other passengers *also* did so, in a co-

ordinated way. It would be self-defeating to do so in isolation, one or two passengers at a time. A few might still try, hoping to spark a wider revolt. But when the others see how easily the rebellion is crushed, the likely effect would be to reinforce the impression that the only sensible option is to make the best of a bad situation, doing what one can to please the hijackers in order to extract some relative advantages for oneself. Indeed, the situation may give many of the passengers – especially the ones who are treated relatively well – a strong motive to identify with the hijackers, to imagine that those who are treated harshly by them must have done something to provoke their mistreatment. After all, by doing as they are told and playing by the hijackers' rules, they find a way to access certain benefits and avoid the worst abuses.

This, in short, is the structure of the situation that exploited and oppressed people face today. It is important to emphasize that some workers – a small but precious minority – do try to put up a serious fight, sometimes winning important gains. But all too often those who rebel are defeated by the superior strength of the powerful. Were all or most of the exploited and oppressed to challenge the system at once, in a sustained and coordinated way, there is little doubt that the rebellion could prevail. But this kind of sustained, broad-based coordination does not exist, and everyone knows it, so revolt against the system just does not seem, to most people, to be a sensible course of action. Are we just stuck, then? Or is there a way out of this impasse?

It is here that the principle that “an injury to one is an injury to all” can help, but only if we avoid misreading it. The worst reading would be a *common-fate* interpretation, according to which it means that *whenever anyone is injured in some way, then everyone is injured in that way*. If that's what the principle means, it's simply false. The fact that one worker is fired unjustly, or sexually harassed, doesn't entail that the same thing happens to every worker. So, we can discard this reading immediately.

A better option is the *common-interest* interpretation: *Whenever one member of the relevant group is harmed in some way, it reveals a form of vulnerability to harm that is shared by all members of the group, so that all share an interest in minimizing their vulnerability*. This reading is not obviously false, but it too is defective. Even if we concede that injuries to some of us

reveal vulnerabilities shared by all of us, this still ignores the fact that vulnerability may be distributed very unequally. For instance, although *all* workers might be vulnerable to police violence, Indigenous or Black workers are much *more* vulnerable to it. To claim that, because all are vulnerable in some way, all must share an interest in minimizing the vulnerability is a bit too optimistic. Those with a lesser degree of vulnerability would presumably have much less to gain by reining in the police. They might even think the benefit of reduced crime outweighs the risk *to them* of continued aggressive policing. When we notice the unequal distribution of vulnerability, we become far more circumspect about the idea that common vulnerability automatically generates a common interest in removing its source.

Where does this leave us? The point of solidarity is to identify something people have in common. The problem is that we can't base our strategy on ignoring or denying the real differences between people, and that's what both the common-fate and common-interest readings seem to do. Maybe an old distinction made by the philosopher Hegel can help. He distinguished between two ways people can have something in common. A *found commonality* is a similarity shared by members of some group that is *discovered* to be already there. An *achieved commonality* is not there in advance, but has to be *forged* by people who find a way to come together in some way (Hegel 1841, 54). In a found commonality, people act in common because they are in some crucial respect *similar* to one another. In an achieved commonality, people are similar only because they have undertaken a course of joint action. With this in mind, we can start to see that solidarity may be less a *description* of us, than an *offer* to us.

What the principle of solidarity offers is proposed terms for an alliance, in which we forge a common bond: *It would be advantageous for each member of the group to commit to defending all others in the group from any harms or injuries, as long as all the others can be counted on to defend each individual in turn.* According to this *common-front* interpretation, the point of solidarity is that it pays off for everyone who lives by it, as long as others reciprocate, but it doesn't rely on people being in "the same boat." If we think back to the hijacked plane, it is clear that the "more advantaged" members of the 99 per cent are actually getting a share of the benefits that are denied

to the less advantaged. Therefore, they do not have especially “common interests.” But a common front would give them access to the kind of coordination and reciprocal defence that would make ending the whole ordeal a realistic prospect.

This makes it clear why the principle of solidarity can help us map a trajectory out of the collective-action impasse laid out in the parable. What solidarity requires of us is not that we pretend we are all the same, but only that we jointly commit to having one another’s back. Yet, this in turn requires that we forge bonds of reciprocal trust and mutual support, and even doing that much can seem like a tall order from our present weak position. How can we make a real start in this direction?

Traditionally, working-class social movements knew exactly how to do this. They systematically cultivated norms and practices that reinforced habits of reliable coordination: the movements took great pains to inculcate the “working-class values” of co-operation, mutual aid, and mutual defence. Unfortunately, changes in modern capitalism have tended to “decompose” these forms of mutual defence and co-operation. These changes include the bureaucratization of unions, the displacement of self-organized practices of mutual aid by professionalized state services, the legalistic routinization of “labour relations,” and the reorganization of workplaces to disempower and de-skill workers. The effect has been to weaken the grip of expectations of solidaristic behaviour, to the point where now the “bourgeois” norms of competition, social climbing, and careerism have come to prevail, even within large parts of the working class, which for so many generations opposed these norms as anti-egalitarian.

But this can be reversed. A recomposition of the bonds of solidarity won’t be easy, but it can be done, if we take up the challenge of constructing new forms of solidarity, co-operation, and mutual aid, while reinvigorating (where possible) the old forms. One part of this will be the emergence of new styles of struggle, more effective in today’s context than the domesticated and defanged varieties of collective action that now predominate, too often integrated into the official political process or the state-supervised labour-relations regime. Just as crucial will be the revitalization of co-operative production and distribution systems that can draw us out of the seemingly totalitarian reach of market and commodity relations, on the one

hand, and bureaucratic “command-and-control” systems, on the other hand. A resurgence of grassroots collectivism could offer a much-needed reminder of our capacity to support and sustain one another, outside and against capital and its state.

A firm embrace of the principle of solidarity, understood as setting out the terms of a mutually advantageous practice of reliable and reciprocal defence of one another, *as if* we were each defending ourselves, has to be returned to the centre of left politics. Only a concerted and persistent commitment to this process of regenerating the shared sense that “an injury to one is an injury to all” can begin to turn the tide against neo-liberalism and weaken the appeal of right-wing populism and its cynical deployment of “anti-Establishment” rhetoric.

REFERENCES

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