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Solidarity: A word in search of flesh

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Who will outsmart who, and who will be kicked out first? This is the job market, and probably society at large, reduced to the level of a TV reality show, writes Bauman. However, though the spirit of solidarity is in exile, it would be premature to give up on the prospect of its return just yet.

To practice solidarity means to base one's thinking and actions on the principle "one for all and all for one". Respecting this principle of mutual responsibility (of the group for the individual, and the individual for the group) was labelled as the state of *solidarité* by the French *Encyclopédie* in 1765. The word stems from the adjective *solidaire*, which means "mutually dependent", "complete", "whole". *Solidaire* stems from the word *solide*, which implies "solidity", "completeness", "massiveness" and "permanence".

[A group with members who display the attributes of solidarity is marked by permanence and resistance to the hardships caused by the widespread human vices of jealousy, mutual distrust, suspicion, conflicts of interests and rivalry. The attitude of solidarity successfully prevents the emergence of opposition between private interests and the common good. It is solidarity which transforms a loose aggregate of individuals into a community; it supplements their physical coexistence with a moral one, thereby raising their interdependence to the rank of a community of fate and destiny... At least such were the hopes attached and pursued when solidarity started to be promoted, cultivated and groomed around the middle of the eighteenth century as the *ancien régime* began to break down and the era of modern nation-state-building opened.](#)



Explosion of solidarity

One of the first initiatives of the organizers of “Occupy Wall Street” was to invite Lech Walesa, the legendary leader of the Polish *Solidarnosc* (Solidarity Movement) to Zuccotti Park in Manhattan so that he could, in a manner of speaking, pass on the baton in the “power to the people” relay race. The occupiers of Wall Street saw themselves as brethren of the social movement that labelled itself *Solidarnosc* and later became an embodiment of everything that managed to unify the Polish people against the political power violating its rights and ignoring its will. In a similar vein, the Wall Street occupiers intended to transcend class, ethnic, religious, political and ideological discords, all of which were dividing Americans and making them prey to egoism, greed, the pursuit of private interests and indifference to the resulting human misery. In their eyes, it was the Wall Street bankers who embodied these plagues.

The occupiers regarded themselves as representatives or rather the vanguard of “ninety nine per cent of Americans”. The proponents of the occupation could not have been unaware of the fact that the “occupiers” arrived in Zuccotti Park from quite divergent nooks and crannies of a notoriously feuding and divided society; but they hoped they would be able to suspend the arguments and tone down antagonism for a period necessary to purge the nightmare that haunted all or almost all Americans to an equal extent (just as the dictatorial communist regime haunted the Poles, the tyranny of Mubarak haunted the Egyptians and the terror of Qaddafi haunted the Libyans).

They avoided engaging in issues on which they differed at all costs – and they specifically avoided discussions on the shape of America after the richest one per cent of Americans, entrenched in the Wall Street banks, would no longer be allowed to capture 93 per cent of the national wealth. The “occupiers” boasted to journalists in the park that their movement was truly popular, spontaneous and not manipulated by anyone – as proven by the lack of leaders aspiring to hijack them in their actions. And they really had no leader – nor could they have had. For a leader worthy of this name is by definition someone with a vision and a programme; and if visions and programmes were worked out in Zuccotti Park, issues previously put aside and cautiously passed over in silence, glaring and not easily resolvable conflicts of interests and preferences would instantly come to the surface. Then, the tent city built in the park would become a ghost town in an instant



– as had frequently happened before, including, for example, on Kiev’s Independence Square or Cairo’s Liberation Square. The several million strong movement, whose aim was to unify the otherwise opposed camps and factions, and all the reasons for continuing the temporary alliance, would immediately cease to be.

As with other “movements of the indignant”, the occupation of Wall Street was, so to speak, an “explosion of solidarity”. Explosions, as we know, are sudden and shocking, but also short lived. And sometimes these movements were (and are) “carnivals of solidarity”. As Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin taught, carnivals are breaks in the monotony of the mundane, bringing a momentary relief from the all-powerful, overwhelming and revolting day-to-day routine. They suspend, declare the routine null and void, albeit only for the duration of the festivities. Once the energy is spent and the poetic exultation subsides, the revellers return to the prose of the quotidian.

Routine needs periodic carnivals as a safety valve – to release the pressure. From time to time, dangerous emotions need to be discharged, bad blood drained off, repugnance and aversion to routine unloaded so that its debilitating and disabling might can be restored. In short, the chances of solidarity are determined less by the passions and hubbub of the “carnival” than by the silence of the dispassionate routine. Do you want solidarity? If so, face and get to grips with the routine of the mundane; with its logic or its inanity, with the powers of its demands, commands and prohibitions. And measure your strength against the patterns of daily pursuits of those people who shaped history while being shaped by it.

Devaluation

To put it mildly, at least in our part of the world, day-to-day drudgery is inhospitable to solidarity. However, it has not always been so. For within the society of builders, which formed on the eve of the modern era, there was a veritable factory of solidarity. It was built upon the vigour and density of human bonds and the obviousness of human interdependencies. Many aspects of contemporary existence taught us a lesson about solidarity and encouraged us to close ranks and march arm in arm: the teeming platoons of workers within factory walls, the uniformity of the working routine regulated by the clock and imposed by the production line, the omnipresence of intrusive supervision and the standardization of disciplinary



demands – but also the conviction of both sides of the class divide, that is the managers and the managed, that their mutual dependence was inevitable and didn't leave any room for evolution. So it was only sensible to work out a permanent *modus covivendi* and self-imposed restraint, which this compromise absolutely demanded.

The benefits of solidarity were also highlighted by the practice of the trade unions, collective bargaining and negotiations, collective work contracts, cooperatives of producers, consumers or lodgers, various kinds of fraternities and mutual aid societies. The logic of state-building within the territorially defined sovereignty of national authorities was conducive to solidarity. And, finally, the slow but sure expansion of the institutions of the welfare state (*Sozialstaat, état providence*) demonstrated the communal nature of human coexistence, based on the ideal and experience of solidarity.

Our profoundly individualized (“late modern”, as it is now often but baselessly called [1]) society of consumers is the very opposite of a factory of solidarity: it produces mutual suspicion and competition. A very common side-effect of the workings of this factory is the devaluation of human solidarity: a refusal or even denial of its utility in the pursuance of personal desires and achieving personal goals. The devaluation of solidarity has its roots in the withering of care for the common good and quality of the society in which the life of the individual takes place. As Ulrich Beck, one of the most perceptive researchers of contemporary cultural transformations, puts it, it is the separate human individual, in his or her distinct nature and lonely struggle for self-determination, rather than a consensual community at any level, that is today burdened with searching for and finding, in an individual way and within the limits defined by the size of its individual resources, “individual” solutions for “socially produced” problems (in its efficiency and absurdity this task is akin to the building of a family bomb-shelter in order to avoid the consequences of nuclear war).

In contrast to societies where the dominant attitude was that of a “gamekeeper” (protection of the common heritage of divine creation entrusted to human care) or a “gardener” (assuming responsibility for the shape of social order and its preservation), the attitude of a “hunter” is today relentlessly and insistently recommended; this attitude is mainly or perhaps even exclusively about the number and size of hunting trophies and the capacity of the hunting bag. Caring for the abundance of animals in the



hunting area, that is the success of future hunts, remains outside the remit of the huntsman. In a society of consumers treating the world as a repository of potential objects of consumption, the recommended life strategy is to carve out a relatively comfortable and safe niche for exclusively private use within the public space, which is hopelessly inhospitable to people, indifferent to human troubles and misery, riddled with ambushes and booby-traps. In this world, solidarity is of little use.

New truths

It is difficult to ascertain what the cause is and what the result is here – but in parallel to the withering of interest in the quality of the common good (and, most importantly, of society itself), the demise and dismantling of traditional “factories of solidarity” can be observed, that is, of institutions that encouraged attitudes of solidarity. The “deregulation of the labour market” and the resultant fluidity of workplace communities characterized by a decreasing – less and less protected by law – stability strongly disfavours forming tighter bonds with “colleagues”. The philosophy of management in its current form transfers the responsibility for financial results of a given company from the superiors to the subordinates, thus putting every employee in a situation of competing with everyone else.

This philosophy demands that the utility of every employee is measured according to his or her personal contribution to the profitability of the company: he or she is forced to compete with the rest of the working team. In essence, forcing workers to fight for their chance to survive another round of dismissals, a move often disguised by such “politically correct” cryptonyms as “contracting out” or “outsourcing”. In a clearly zero-sum game, joining and closing ranks will be of little use and will not help much in surviving – on the contrary, it is becoming dangerously close to a suicidal urge. And even more ominously, the formerly mutual dependence of the management and the workforce, with the resultant mutuality of duties and responsibilities, has been unilaterally revoked.

If the potential employees find it difficult to move on, their potential employers may transfer themselves (or their capital) from place to place without much trouble; so in the marriage of the bosses with their subordinates, a divorce initiated by the former and dictated by their interests is possible at every turn. We can hardly speak here about a solidarity of fate while a solidarity of actions cannot be expected; the bonds



are too loose for that, the responsibilities too fragile and too easy to revoke. Jobs may disappear, along with bosses and owners, at any moment, leaving even the most loyal, useful and valued employees without work and means. Efforts at inventing a mutually attractive and long-term *modus covivendi* do not make much sense in these conditions; and mutual solidarity does not stand much chance.

These new truths are vividly demonstrated and inculcated by the popular reality television shows. And these truths promoted by the media announce that participants in these shows are enemies; that making good and surviving the battle must be at the cost of your neighbour. Everyone's primary goal is to survive and get the others kicked out first; and so this should be your aim too. Coalitions (if built at all) are ad hoc and temporary, they do not outlast their usefulness in promoting one's own interest and undermining the interest of others; nobody vows fidelity here and nobody takes up the burden of long-term (let alone eternal) responsibilities. Banishment, pronounced every week in the case of most of these shows, is an absolute law. The only unknown being who will outsmart who and designate him or her for expulsion. There is no room here for a "common cause" or the responsibility for others - it is everyone for themselves. As if the authors and producers of reality TV conspired to provide additional arguments for the sad conclusion of Sigmund Freud that, of all God's commandments, the injunction to "love your neighbour as yourself" is the most difficult to fulfil and the most risky in its consequences.

Evil intentions

The threat haunting contemporary urban life and the tendency of spatial separation and isolation is not at all conducive to solidarity. Armed bodyguards watch entrances to offices and "gated communities", where those who can afford it - among them people setting the tone of urban life - look for (hugely expensive) shelter from the dangers supposedly swarming the city streets. In the cities we see more and more architectural solutions which hamper access or passage instead of facilitating it. Closed circuit television cameras stare at us with glassy eyes from behind every corner and from every entrance. In similar vein to the overseers in the watchtowers of the Panopticon (invented by Jeremy Bentham and considered by Michel Foucault as the archetype of the modern technology of power, an architectural solution for superiors who must control their subordinates), they spy on us in order to stop us from "entering" rather "escaping". They



are instruments not so much of the Panopticon but of the *Banopticon* – keeping undesirables at a (theoretically) safe distance from your own backyard and from mischief, which is (by definition) expected of them.

Every stranger (and in a city, especially a big one, we are strangers to each other with very few exceptions) is suspected of evil intentions. And all the aforementioned ways of preventing real or illusionary threats to the body and possessions do not assuage the sense of danger and do not suppress the fear of strangers; on the contrary, they are the most visible proof of the reality of the threat and justify the fear generated when confronted with the “stranger”. The more elaborate the locks, padlocks and chains we install by day, the more terrifying the nightmares of break-ins and lootings that haunt us by night. It becomes even more difficult for us to communicate with those behind the door and to open this door. The deepening of our mutual physical and mental isolation, the loss of common language and the ability to communicate with and understand each other – these processes no longer need to receive external stimuli; as if they were guided by the “do it yourself principle” in an exemplary, model way, they feed on themselves, spur themselves on and have their own momentum. It is tempting to see in them the first perpetuum mobile that humankind ever succeeded in constructing.

So yes, it is true that quite a lot of evidence (much more than I managed to list here) has accumulated, illustrating to us that the world in which we happen to live in and which we recreate daily – wittingly or not – through our actions is not particularly impressive as far as accommodating solidarity is concerned. But there is also no lack of evidence showing us that the spirit of and hunger for solidarity in the world frustrated with this inhospitality will not give up.

Time after time, stealthily but stubbornly, this spirit may return from exile. Successive episodes of “explosive solidarity” and ever more frequent “carnivals of solidarity” (for carnivals celebrate what we most glaringly and painfully miss in our daily drudgery) testify to that. Local initiatives such as ad hoc cooperative undertakings are mushrooming – even if they are usually modest and often ephemeral. In multiple ways the word “solidarity” is patiently looking for flesh which it could become. And it won’t stop seeking eagerly and passionately until it succeeds.

In this search for flesh by a word we, the inhabitants of the twenty-first century, are both agents and objects of the quest. We are the point of



departure and the final destination, but also wanderers following this route and tracing it with our footsteps. With our footsteps, this route will ultimately emerge – but it is difficult to draw its exact course on the map before it happens. Despite this difficulty it is impossible to resist the temptation of designing such a map. Designs of such maps are countless. But of those I am familiar with, one design seemed to be sketched with an incomparably greater responsibility for the word solidarity, because its understanding of the limitations in predicting the course of history by humans is much better than in the case of most “road maps”. This design, a work of one of the most powerful minds of our times, sociologist Richard Sennett, is not a map of an as yet untraveled route but a collection of positioning instructions regarding the technique of planning the route when it is travelled in the future.

Sennett’s heuristic formula (which he defines as a “contemporary form of humanism”, but outlines in terms of a journey towards a humanity made with solidarity in mind) is three-fold: “informal, open-ended, cooperation”. Each of the three parts of this formula is equally important. “Informality” warns us that we should join the common action without any predetermined agenda and code of conduct – allowing both to emerge gradually and crystalize in the course of cooperation. “Open-endedness” recommends that we should not assume that our own view of things is correct but we should accept the possibility of discovering its wrongness; we should not burden future interaction with the aim of imposing our opinion on other participants or persuading them that our view is right and their view is wrong; we should aim at both teaching and learning – combine the role of a teacher with that of a student. And to define the nature of the interaction Sennett chooses the concept of “cooperation” rather than “dialogue” or “negotiation”, for it is not about establishing whose arguments win and whose arguments lose.

In the “informal open-ended cooperation”, just as with humanity based on solidarity, there are no winners or losers: from the “informal, open-ended cooperation together”, just as from the effort of building the ties of solidarity, every participant comes out wiser, richer and more resourceful than they were before. They know more, they are capable of more – and so they want to and can undertake more ambitious and important tasks. Whatever you could say about “informal open-ended cooperation”, it definitely is not a zero-sum game.



Footnotes

1. It is baseless to call it this because "lateness" is an attribute we can ascribe to a period only when looking back, after an era consisting of different stages has ended. And the end of the modern era does not seem to be on the cards.