Solidarity in liberal democracies is pluralistic, argues political scientist Ira Katznelson; it allows particularities of time and place while satisfying a widely held human interest. Democracy, too, takes a variety of forms and is best measured by historical standards.

Agnieszka Rosner: Let me start with a kind of thought experiment. If Niccolò Machiavelli came to Europe today, what advice would he give to the European Union?

Ira Katznelson: What a wonderful question. The challenge for the prince, the authorities, begins even before the EU’s current problems concerning social integration, the refugee crisis, minorities and so on. Firstly, Machiavelli would probably be shocked to witness that almost all of Europe belongs today to organizations, whether to the EU itself or to NATO, organizations that in principle take popular sovereignty as the basis of authority and of legitimacy. The democratic revolution that obsessed de Tocqueville is, in fact, taken for granted. There is no Ancien Régime. There is no Prince. There is no sovereignty that can fail to recognize the limits on governments, limits that stem from their chance to rule being only provisional, not because of weapons or war or revolution but because of the simple, accepted mechanism of going into a booth, selecting a name on a piece of paper, counting the votes and then, tomorrow, you are no longer the prince.

So first, when you ask what Machiavelli would advise, he would probably take some time, though since he was a genius, he would probably figure it out: what kind of rule this is, what kind of rulers these are. But he would have been surprised in a different dimension. He would have been surprised to discover that these provisional, apparently weak, rulers were ruling institutions with capacities he never could have imagined. Not only do they have control over physical force and a quality of potential violence that could never have been imagined previously, whether from the air or otherwise, but they represent states
that are much larger territorially than those of his princes, and that have three characteristics that did not exist during his lifetime.

The first characteristic is a claim to have indivisible rule over fairly large amounts of territory, and control over the people who live there. A world of sovereign, national states of a kind that did not previously exist. Second, he would have been shocked to discover the scope of institutions that belong to this state, that is, an ensemble of institutions specific to the state itself and not to any personal authority of a ruler – these are the institutions of a more abstract, sovereign entity. And third, he would have discovered that in today’s Europe, all these states have legitimating stories that are grounded in a very strong notion of equality among citizens. Even regimes like those of Viktor Orbán or Vladimir Putin, which most of us would not consider as the most desirable of liberal democracies: they legitimize their rule through the notion of popular sovereignty and popular approval. And they win elections.

I think the first thing that Machiavelli would do is probably take a sabbatical, he was after all an academic, and think about what he had discovered. Then he would come back and say: ‘under these conditions, how would it be possible to ensure the territorial and population-based sovereignty of the state? How would it be possible to render the institutions of the state capable and, through the story of popular sovereignty, legitimate? And he would observe that today there’s a crisis at multiple levels, certainly in Europe, of capacity and legitimacy. This is a crisis that manifests itself on at least two levels: the level of each nation-state, and the level of ‘integrated Europe’. So his advice would be oriented toward asking how, under these conditions, is it possible to simultaneously strengthen the sovereignty of institutions and of legitimate normative stories. Both those of the nation-states and of the superstructure of the European Union.

He might offer two kinds of different advice, and neither would be appealing from the liberal democratic perspective: firstly, to create much higher walls and stronger borders. No non-European should enter Europe. And no European should have free movement to cross national lines. And having guaranteed that, Machiavelli might say, legitimacy, capacity and sovereignty might be strengthened. But then he might be told that, under contemporary social and economic conditions, this is impossible. The economy requires that, even for every minute of the day, millions, billions of euros, dollars, zlotys, whatever, float across these borders, through a technology that states do not control. Second, he would learn that there has been a communications revolution that makes it impossible to shut out ideas from other places. Third, he would discover that even if people face high walls, they find ways to climb over them or dig under them. So what is the alternative to high walls? The alternative might be to advise that all of the walls be dissolved. To substitute networks for the modern state and its institutions. Substitute fluidity, flexibility: a genuine revolution in forms of governance, as great as that as the formation of original nation-states. But of course that would open up the question of identity: who are we without borders? Which institutions survive and which don’t? How would collective decision-making be conducted and who would make the decisions? What would happen to the concept of sovereignty, which might well dissolve? My sense is, and of course this is purely hypothetical, that first, Machiavelli would advise raising the borders and then, when he discovers why that is not possible, he might be radical enough to want to dissolve all borders.
If Machiavelli had recognized that we have to dissolve all borders, he would probably think about some new idea of citizenship. Maybe the idea of solidarity would be something that could help build this new citizenship. Is the idea of solidarity something universal or are there specific cultural conditions surrounding this phenomenon?

There might be a third option, which is that, while solidarity is a universal impulse, there are variations in both content, degree of intensity and the nature of the relations between culture and institutions that sustain it, which may vary a lot from place to place. There may also be very different dimensions that undergird solidarity. In the United States, of course there are sub-groups or group solidarities – Irish Americans, Polish Americans – cultural forms of solidarity, but these are not civic forms of solidarity in the sense of a common citizenship. The American form of political solidarity is one that might be called solidarity in a liberal tradition of civic citizenship; republican as well as liberal. It’s a bit like in a work of John Rawls, near the end of his life, where in his book *Political Liberalism*, he asked the question: how can people who have different values, perhaps incommensurable values, share a common public space? And that common public space will require, not in his language but in the language of your question, a degree of solidarity in the sense that people believe themselves to be sharing a common fate, a common political fate, and therefore they join together in institutions, where everyone can participate according to the rules of the game, even though their value systems, their languages, their faiths may differ, even dramatically.

This is Rawls’s famous curtain experiment...

His curtain, his veil of ignorance experiment, he rejected late in life. He then said: Look, I made a mistake because the veil of experience denies any particularity. We are just humans. Pick any group of people, put them behind this curtain of ignorance and then they will create rules of justice, which I believe will look like this. But in his late work he says: That’s naive. Especially in the western world, ever since the Reformation, even among Christians, people killed each other for differences in values and beliefs, you can’t just put them behind the curtain. They know who they are. The question is: can we create the circumstances in which they can live together in common, solidaristic citizenship, of civic solidarity, what he calls ‘a world of reasonable plurals’. What makes it reasonable is that there are institutions that join them together civically.

Now, there are other ways to create solidarity. There can be solidarity based on faith, there can be solidarity based on the colour of one’s skin, there can be solidarity based on country of origin or the country in which you live. There are even smaller units of solidarity, based on villages or on ethnic tribes. The propensity to live not just as an individual or in a couple or even a family, but to live in solidarity with others is I think a deep human relational desire. But there are enormous variations as regards the manner in which it is expressed. Some forms of solidarity are so strong and cohesive that anyone beyond that boundary has no hope, is excluded, can never be a member.

Other forms of solidarity may be so weak as to be meaningless, and then there are some forms of solidarity that may have a different basis but are nonetheless sufficiently open and tolerant as to allow new members. Or, if they don’t quite fully allow new members, they recognize that there is no one single given legitimate basis of solidarity and that the community next door is much like them but they happen to have a different history. I
think it’s a case of discovering that kind of zone, a kind of middle zone of solidarity which
would always have particularities of time and place but satisfies a jointly and widely held
human interest.

Can there also be solidarity within fascist groups?

I think that we would not like to call it solidarity. There’s a complicated English word that
I had never heard, but read in a book by the political scientist David Truman. Writing
about America, he remarks that even a healthy political system can become what he calls
morbific, which really means sick. I think of fascist ‘solidarity’ as morbific solidarity. It
has a family resemblance to healthy solidarity, just like a diseased cell has a relationship
to a healthy cell. If you think about, let’s say, Mussolini’s fascism: I read the diaries of his
minister of aviation Italo Balbo and what they say is: ‘We represent the Italian nation, the
whole Italian nation as one’ – solidarity. They say: ‘We are better democrats.’ Why?
Because liberal democracy has divided parties, has people with money influencing
politics, has a weak sense of the public interest and common good. They say: ‘We,
proudly, are totalitarian democrats.’ They use the word ‘totalitarian’ positively, not
critically, but happily. ‘We, totalitarians, use the state, to express and shape the solidarity
of the Italian nation.’ It’s a claim about solidarity and it can only work if the people agree
to it, because it was based on consent, not just force, there was force, there was
repression, but there was also a lot of consent. Why did people consent? Because they
believed that that form of solidarity was more pure, more cohesive, more effective than
other forms of less strong solidarity. So would we call it solidarity? I prefer not to. I
prefer to call it fascism. But I think of it as morbific solidarity.

What about the cultural conditions for liberal democracy?

We now observe in some
European countries that democracy doesn’t work in the way we want it to. Do you think
the reason for this is to be found in cultural conditions or elsewhere?

I’m sceptical of the argument that you must have strong cultural preconditions before
you can have democracy. But I also think that in most of modern history, during the
nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries, we’ve learned that democracy is not the
norm, or that healthy democracy is not the norm, and many democracies suffer either
anxieties or fragility. So the question that really challenges us is a fundamental question
of social science: under what conditions can democracy thrive? And you’re asking
whether one of those conditions is cultural. Perhaps. But what we see, or at least what I
think we see, is that we’ve had relatively established and stable democracies in the last
half-century under very different cultural conditions. Examples would be post-war Japan,
post-war or post-independence India, post-Peron Argentina, post-military dictatorship
Brazil and perhaps various post-communist regimes. When you add that they are not
exactly democracies as we would like them, then we have to say much more about what
we would like.

But if we ask the following question: today, are there democracies in the world that we
would at least be confident enough to call established democracies that have two
characteristics? One: they have regular elections and the people who get voted out,
leave. Historically, it is not true that rulers allowed themselves to be voted out of office.
Second: these regimes have institutions, especially parliaments, that are law-making
institutions, and the laws they pass are policy outcomes that are provisional, because the
next election can deliver a majority for a different party, which might have a different view about how to regulate energy or the economy, or have rules for migration or whatever. And I guess we can ask third, whether or not these established democracies, or democracies that have these traits and do not seem to be so fragile that they run the risk of a military coup or a dictatorship tomorrow, can also guarantee some basic level of rights to their citizens? The rights to express themselves, to publish, to meet, to contest and so on.

If you look at these countries today, you would say yes, they’re not perfect, they may currently have governments that we don’t like at all, that have authoritarian tendencies and so on, but if you ask: are these, by historical standards, reasonably durable democracies, then you will find that the cultural basis for these democracies are enormously varied. That makes me sceptical as to whether we can find the right cultural basis.

Institutions that work towards a better society – like, for example the European Solidarity Centre here in Gdansk – are of course part of culture, part of building society. Do such institutions work? So what I was answering was a question about culture in a different sense, culture in terms of beliefs, values, the practices of religious faith. There are some that would argue that unless a country has a common basis in religion, it’s unlikely to have enough social integration to have democracy. I am sceptical about those arguments.

However, now you’re asking me about culture in the sense of robust, strong institutions of civil society. And there I think it’s crucially important that there are zones of autonomous self-organization among members of the citizenry in order to be able to thoughtfully exercise the capacities of democratic politics. Yes, that I think is deeply important. We’re sitting here in Poland, in Gdansk, where a political theory of the opposition emerged in the 1970s and 1980s that was very civil society-based. But what they, and some of our friends, discovered was that once they were in power, the civil society model alone was not sufficient. They also had to think about state-building and democratic institutions and political parties and pluralistic parties, you couldn’t just have Civic Forum rule Czechoslovakia forever.

I was in Prague when they were having their first election campaign after the change and there was a dominant force, which was Civic Forum, but then there were 40 or so small parties, some of them crazy, one a free love party. In this party, there was a woman, I’m afraid I might sound like Donald Trump, but she was very large and square, to me she looked like a caricature of a member of the Albanian communist party, dressed in dark brown clothes, looking very stern and, frankly, not very attractive. And behind her were pornographic pictures on television, explaining the values of free love. That was crazy. There was also a vegetarian party. What people soon discovered was: you could not have a functioning democracy with just Civic Forum, because underneath the civic emblem were ideologies. Some people were more to the right, some were more to the left. There wasn’t just a natural civic consensus.

Healthy civil society has disagreements, so then you need parties, but there can’t be 40 parties representing every little interest, from what you eat to how you make love to whether you stand on your head and wiggle your ears. What you have to do is create a small number of parties. What they also discovered is that the names of the most likely
parties were the ones that democracies have used for the long time: social democrats, Christian democrat, liberal, etc. Because politics is about organized and somewhat predictable contestation between views on how the state and the market and how the state and civil society should transact with each other. And that’s what democratic politics is about. Not about the right answer but about answers and then a competition among them.

Would you say that solidarity is also some kind of contract?

Yes and no. When I hear the word ‘contract’, I think of a rather unemotional transaction. I buy milk, I pay you four zloty. It’s got nothing to do with affection or commitment or values. And it’s a very efficient way to conduct an economy. We have contracts about property. But it is true that even in zones of life like marriage, which are not just money exchanges, there is affection involved.

We need some rules.

Yes, we need limits. There is a contractual element to it. In that sense, it’s the same with solidarity, but a solidarity that is simply contractual is never enough, you wouldn’t call it solidarity. People who speak about economic contracts, say, of a post-war world, which is now under stress, because there is too much inequality, traditional manufacturing jobs have disappeared, low-skilled people may not see any place for themselves in the new economy. If there is a genuine societal solidarity, their plight is also the plight of the persons who have not suffered in the same way. So there has to be a human and emotional connection across society. Economic solidarity may have failed. But if a solidarity of a broader kind never existed, it won’t magically appear. And I think there are places that are more caring, collectively, than other places, in part because they experience either civic, or religious, or ethnic, or civil society dynamics of solidarity. But pure contract is too cold for me.

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