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Solidarity in Europe: The History of an Idea

Steinar Stjernø

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'Solidarity' is one of those words that is used so frequently as a rhetorical gesture that is not easy to discern whether there is also, somewhere beneath the froth, a theoretical concept. In political theory the judgement so far appears to be entirely negative, for, as Steinar Stjernø comments, it has virtually ignored the analysis of solidarity as a concept (p. 20). In this ambitious and highly impressive text, Professor Stjernø remedies this inexplicable gap in the literature and, hopefully, lights the way for further research into a concept which ought to be at the centre of political debate in the global age.

The relationship between the rhetorical use of the term and its potential as conceptual tool is tricky, yet in the past this has not prevented theorists attempting to clarify the descriptive and normative meaning of other "hurrah" concepts such as democracy and liberty. In acknowledging the difficulties Stjernø discusses different methodological approaches to the study of the history of ideas, arguing that his own approach owes more to Michael Freedén's work than to Quentin Skinner's. In particular he does not want to restrict himself to examining the work of individual theorists, and in the second part of the book he examines the evolution of the concept in the language of political parties and movements in order to ascertain shifts in meaning and context.

How does Stjernø define solidarity? He provides a 'statist' definition whereby solidarity is conceived as 'the preparedness to share resources with others by personal contribution to those in struggle or in need through taxation and redistribution organised by the state' (p. 2). This enables him to analyse how an often-vague idea, developed in different ideological traditions, has been utilised in political programmes which helped to fashion the social structures of modern West European societies. However, it also plays down the myriad ways in which solidarity has been practiced beyond the reach of states. So, there is



very little here about either how solidarity was operationalised and discussed in the trade union movements, or its significance in the anarchist tradition, where it was a key principle. The latter is acknowledged by Stjernø but he chooses to ignore it on the grounds that anarchism failed to achieve power (p. 58). However, it may well be that anarchist contributions of the past may still have resonance today, when the idea of strong interventionist welfare states is in retreat, or, as Jessop argues, has ended.

In the first part of the book, three traditions of solidarity are identified. The first is the social theory tradition of the 19th and early 20th century, and here the discussion is fascinating but rather compressed, covering Charles Fourier, Pierre Leroux, August Comte and Emile Durkheim in 15 pages. The second is the socialist tradition, which the author associates with the emergence of Marxism as a political movement. Kautsky is seen as promoting the dual sense of solidarity as a general feeling of togetherness cutting across class interests and also the increasing awareness of the common interests of the workers. This opened the way for a move from the latter to the former in classical social democracy, and here Bernstein's *The Labour Movement* is seen as a key text. He also looks at the Leninist model, expressed by Lukacs, in which the solidarity of the class-conscious vanguard is regarded as a pre-requisite for the transformation of society. Although European social democracy was dominated by Marxism before the First World War, it is evident from the discussion that solidarity was not a significant theoretical concept in a movement which was otherwise very keen on theoretical clarity. This is probably a consequence of Marxism's unwillingness to engage in moral discourse, but the moral power of the appeal of solidarity was such that it became central to the tradition. It is quite possible that solidarity emerged largely from non-Marxist socialist sources, including Christian socialism, not considered here. The third tradition is the Catholic tradition flowing from various Papal encyclicals, to which he adds a discussion of recent modern Protestant contributions; this tradition contributes to the emergence of Christian Democracy as a strong political movement in Western Europe following the Second World War.

Part two concentrates on the ways in which solidarity developed in the programmes and manifestos of social-democratic parties from the late 19th century until recently, and then examines the same process in Christian Democracy. There is a wealth of material here of great value to all those interested in the history of the idea of solidarity, but also in the ways in which the moral dimension of social responsibility takes hold in public life after the carnage of two World Wars. In the case of social democracy, Stjernø depicts a move from the use of solidarity as an appeal to class unity in the early part of the 20th century to a more general appeal to the solidarity of the vast majority from the 1950s on (earlier in the case of Sweden). This culminated in the proliferation of the concept of solidarity in the 1989 Berlin programme of



the German SPD, when solidarity is extended to gender relations, first world — third world relations, and between the generations in terms of ecological sustainability. In practice the constraints imposed on nation states by the demands of a world economy driven by neo-liberalism have made it difficult for social democrats to move forward with a strong solidarity agenda, as the author fully appreciates. Not only does he think that the ‘ineliminable’ core of the social-democratic concept is hard to pin down, but it is not clear how it differs from that of the Christian-democratic standpoint (p. 202). Nevertheless, the fact that solidarity is still part of the Christian-democratic discourse at least keeps open the possibility of a European social model as an alternative to the neo-liberalism championed by the US.

As the second part is concluded by a discussion of notions of solidarity in Marxist-Leninism and Fascism as what he terms ‘excursions’, the impression given at this stage in the book is that solidarity is an outdated concept, the vagueness of which has led to some unfortunate abuses. However, the third part of the book deals with the revival of the idea of solidarity in recent years, both in social theory and Christian theology. The former includes discussions of systems theory, rational choice theory and communitarianism, as well as looking at contributions from Beck, Giddens, Habermas and Rorty. Hauke Brunkhorst’s *Solidariat* (2002) figures largely here, and this important work is now available in English translation. A surprising omission is any mention of Axel Honneth’s *The Struggle for Recognition*, which adopts an inter-subjectivist perspective similar to Habermas’s and which theorises solidarity more rigorously than any other work. The important theologians discussed here are the Catholic Hans Kung and the Protestant Jürgen Moltmann, and this brings out the potential importance of reviving a religious commitment to solidarity. The final chapter looks at some of the challenges to the continued relevance of solidarity in the twenty-first century, and although there is no false optimism here, the discussion of global citizenship at least opens the possibility of the development of new forms of social solidarity. Although the third part is highly compressed it serves its purpose well, for it sketches the major areas of debate in which the concept of solidarity could usefully be developed.

Although I am critical of certain aspects of this text, it is unquestionably required reading for anyone with a research interest in solidarity, and for all students who are interested in finding out more about the history of this elusive but perennially attractive idea.

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