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A critique of solidarity

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While generally well-intentioned, the concept of solidarity involves an unequal power relationship between those offering and receiving it. A preferable state of affairs would be partnership, placing Western activists and their counterparts elsewhere on equal footing.

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There is no reason why one shouldn’t be able to imagine Syrians, or Palestinians, or Kurds, expressing solidarity with the victims of a political or natural catastrophe in Western countries. Yet the direction of solidarity seems almost always to be the contrary; it is those in affluent, powerful, Western nations who express solidarity with troubled countries elsewhere, and the political misfortunes faced by their peoples, or certain groups of them. Shortly after the nihilistic attack on the Charlie Hebdo magazine offices in Paris in January 2015, some Syrians expressed identification with the slain writers and cartoonists on social media, even raising “Je Suis Charlie” banners in areas outside Assad regime control. The concept of solidarity this article seeks to critique is not this admirable feeling of goodwill toward victims, however, but rather solidarity as an ingrained institution and form of political activism widespread in the West today, tying Western activists to the communities or causes of weaker, violable countries.

Power relations

The structure of the world, divided into flourishing metropolises and floundering backwaters, underlies the solidarity relationship, and determines its direction. The effect of this structure is not lessened by the fact that the theater of solidarity is exclusively in the West, even if the “raw” causes come mostly from outside it. As people or movements of solidarity in the West, we can do things to support the cause we endorse, but we discover quickly that the agents of the cause rarely know how to act, and speak, and promote their cause; indeed for them to speak could bring disaster to the cause itself. Thus it becomes

necessary to manufacture an acceptable cause; to move it from the raw state to the finished state. This involves empowering representatives of the causes coming from over there to speak here, and likewise to interpret the causes, and determine what gets said about them and what does not; what should be exposed and what should be concealed—manufacturing themselves, in other words, and removing themselves from the "state of nature" into a state of culture. This manufacture, and removal, falls on the Western solidarity-actor, along with the responsibility of custodianship.

By this means, the solidarity relationship renders the cause subordinate to the solidarity, or the product of it. The cause gets shaped in the manner that secures the largest yield of solidarity possible; that is, in the manner that guarantees it entry into the solidarity marketplace, to compete with other causes for promotion and returns. Through competition, solidarity activism drives us towards an archipelago of solidarity groups distinct from one another; our solidarity here and their solidarity there, a third one with some other cause over there. Between the different solidarities, the relationship is one of mutual competition and exclusion, and within each one it is of steering and dependency. There is no intermingling, no coordination, and no cooperation; on the contrary, some of the worst enmity is that between older and newer solidarity-supplicants. On Labor Day this year, in Berlin, we Syrians who have not previously been seen much in public spaces were afraid of animosity from other Middle Eastern solidarity groups against us (I beg for forgiveness for not being more specific).

The most important thing masked by this mutual competition, however, is the power relationship inside each

solidarity group, behind the shared cause; a relationship by which the solidarity-provider acts as spokesperson, interpreter, and adviser—the creator and director of the cause—while the solidarity recipient is merely a stage actor and implementer. In other words, solidarity conceals the reality that its provider is in fact a custodian, with the recipient in his custody, or under her protection. This is not a healthy and equitable relationship. And even if the recipient, or ward, is not expected to express gratitude openly, they are nonetheless in too weak a position to criticize the paternalist tendencies of their guardian, the cause's manufacturer.

That is, unless they leave the relationship, or revolt against it.

The solidarity marketplace

The basis of the foregoing is that solidarity enters the marketplace today as a commodity, and with the market there is competition, and a tendency toward monopoly: taking as much as possible of the proceeds of solidarity for oneself, leaving nothing for others, perhaps even attacking those who try to take a share of the market for themselves.

As the solidarity marketplace seeks to rank victims in groups, some enjoying much of it while others are left with little, or none, or even with enmity, it creates ranks of solidarity-recipients, and mutual competition between them over worthiness of recognition and esteem, in exchange for obscuring the worthiness of others' causes. For example, not many of those who express solidarity with the Palestinian cause do the same for its Syrian counterpart.

Some of the better-known among them, indeed, place the one against the other, and promote specific Palestinians for the purpose. Neither do those who offer solidarity with the Kurdish cause, among those who have entered the solidarity field via the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) organization in Turkey, do the same with the Syrian cause. For the most part, they offer a mix of total disregard with an intensely unfriendly spirit of hostility, finding in Europe people who satisfy their need for self-satisfaction by such means. A few months ago, again in Berlin, I attended a solidarity meeting with the PYD (the Syrian branch of the PKK) about Raqqa, shortly after the city's occupation by the Americans and the Kurdish PKK-linked organization. The meeting's headline was "After Raqqa: Rojava between attack and revival." The speakers were two Kurds living in Europe, coming originally from Turkey, and a German moderator. Not one of the three knew Raqqa, or had been to Syria, or to "Rojava" (the Kurdish term for the Syrian portion of the envisaged future state of Kurdistan). The audience were mostly Germans and Kurds. I was the only Syrian, the only Raqqawi, and perhaps the only "Rojavan," as they hadn't even invited any Syrian Kurds. I learned of the meeting from the German moderator, who happened to be my colleague at a research institute in Berlin. She knew I was a Syrian from Raqqa, and so had asked me for information about the city and its situation. It hadn't occurred to her that in asking me to help her strengthen her argument in support of the cause with which she provided solidarity, she was rendering my own invisible cause more invisible still. The reality is she hadn't envisaged that I had a cause at all, and that it might not be in alignment with—or might even be opposed to—the cause she had adopted, and saw none other than. Here is an extreme case of agency-stripping, in the name of solidarity,

justice, and humanitarianism.

The solidarity market segregates conflicts from one another, just as the commodities market does with producers. Both markets conceal the roots of discrimination in the global political or economic structures by presenting it as nothing more than fair competition.

Solidarity against solidarity

Selective solidarity is a widespread phenomenon, and it imbues solidarity with a spirit of hypocrisy that has not, to my knowledge, been sufficiently criticized. In one recent article, “Syria and the Problem of Left Solidarity,” Donya Alinejad and Saskia Baas did highlight this hypocrisy and duplicity of Western leftist criteria regarding Afrin and Eastern Ghouta (the Kurdish-majority district northwest of Aleppo and the besieged enclave east of Damascus, respectively, both under attack at the time they were writing). Their article itself, however, displayed the same limited knowledge of Syria and its social and political history seen in almost all Western leftist thought about the country. Neither of the writers know anything about the history of the relationship between the Assadist state and the PKK; or that the latter organization, which stands for progressive change in Turkey but nothing of the kind in Syria, has been hostile to the Syrian revolution from the very beginning; or that the entry of its fighters from Turkey and elsewhere into Syria was the result of an agreement reached between it and the Assad regime in July 2012.

The most important problem with the article, though, is that it says nothing about how any Syrians represent their

struggle. The writers do not refer to a single Syrian, nor do they feel the need to include anything on the story of Syrians' decades-long struggle. They recall the example of the 2004 Kurdish uprising, but without saying anything about any other Syrians' resistance to the Assads' rule throughout all their years in power.

And naturally, the well-intentioned article, which seeks to distribute solidarity equitably, places no doubt in the concept of solidarity itself. In the American and Western solidarity markets in which the writers are operating, causes are separated from their owners (just as the capitalist labor market separates producers from the means of production), and solidarity-providers take charge of waging the wars of solidarity, or defending the fair distribution of solidarity, as Alinejad and Baas do, without critiquing the market or questioning the information given about the commodity offered, or thinking about the conditions of solidarity production as politics.

In terms of the information put forward by the writers, it's correct that Afrin received more solidarity than Ghouta. The solidarity market did not offer the writers the possibility of a fair distribution of solidarity, and they exerted no effort searching outside the market. Their article is in itself an example of the conflict between the individual honesty and justice of solidarity-providers and the non-justice of solidarity as a relationship in the market, and as an alternative to shared action for the sake of equality. One should perhaps clarify here that the critique of solidarity is by no means a critique of solidarity-expressers, who are driven by the highest humanitarian motives, but is rather a critique of solidarity as a power relation and as a market.

Solidarity as a tax

It seems to me there are extensive structures supporting solidarity as a market, represented in the makeup of neo-liberalism and the rise of identity politics and the global crisis of the left. Solidarity appears to be a form of tax paid by just and capable individuals, seldom brought together by political organizations that have lost their attraction. Leftists whose thought increases in poverty, and Western-centrism, do not object to this socio-politico-economic makeup without paying that tax; solidarity itself. But by paying this tax, identity politics and its social and economic roots remain above criticism. And since identity politics places certain groups in confrontation with others, solidarity is not freed from the logic of confrontational identity politics, whether when it thinks of the solidarity-recipients as victims (thus stripping them of agency), or when it ranks certain victims above others in terms of patronage. Identity politics re-produces itself by expansion at the expense of what is supposed to be trans-identity activism.

This is not a pathological accident that struck the concept of solidarity from the outside, but rather one extreme example of many that show that the solidarity market in which causes and their advocates come together results in the forming of ties that are exclusive and exclusionary, unequal and uncooperative. And few, also, for the market doesn’t welcome new arrivals; tending instead toward a monopoly of the few, if not a monopoly of one.

Here, solidarity plays a role against equality; marketing some causes and marginalizing others. Just as commodities

are present in the physical market while producers are absent, causes are present in the solidarity market while people are absent. One cause renders another absent entirely, because the solidarity market, like any other, has a polarizing dynamic; resulting in the enriching of some and the impoverishing of others. At the aforementioned “After Raqqa” meeting, there was no Syrian cause, or mention of Raqqa’s residents except in an ambiguous depiction of them as liberated from ISIS, free to smoke again, their women allowed to wear colorful clothes. Nothing about the struggle of any of them against Assad’s rule, nothing about those of them detained before ISIS, or even by ISIS. No names, no pictures, no stories, no histories. It was a traumatizing situation for me personally: I found myself invisible, non-existent, in a place where two strangers who didn’t know my city or country repeated their monologues about liberation, and even about the struggle against imperialism. I was the voiceless poor, and the gathering’s framework was silencing my voice further.

Worlds in isolation

Aside from the power relationship that corrupts solidarity, and the mostly lopsided and incomplete knowledge of solidarity-providers, and the stripping of solidarity-recipients’ agency for the manufacture of a just cause for them, and even the ranking of victims in unequal hierarchies in a way that emulates the ranking of peoples and cultures and ethnicities—that is, in a racist manner—aside from all that, the essential problem in the concept of solidarity is that it disregards the interconnectedness of problems in the world today. It

supposes that the problems of Syrians, or Palestinians, or Kurds, or Congolese, or Rwandans, or Iranians, or Turks, or others, are independent of the problems of Western societies; that is, that we live in many worlds rather than one, and that solidarity with “them” in those deeply troubled worlds may be a humanitarian and political duty, but the distinction remains between the worlds of action and influence, and those of trouble and tumult.

Yet is it true that the Syrian cause today is an exclusively Syrian one? Is it not, in fact, a Middle Eastern, and European, and Western, and global one? A Turkish, German, Swedish, and Dutch one, as much as it is a Lebanese, Jordanian, Egyptian, and Palestinian one? The same goes for the Palestinian cause, and the Kurdish cause; all are different faces of one composite, interactive cause; the cause of an intertwined world, the problems of which cannot be resolved in isolation from one another. Among the faces of this cause are the social, economic, and security problems faced by Germans, French, Americans, and other people, and the communion, friendship, and, yes, solidarity they require. The problems of Germany and Turkey (I confine myself to two countries of which I know something) are Syrian problems as much as they are also Kurdish, Palestinian, and other problems. Do Germans really not need us to stand alongside them and befriend them? I assume that solidarity itself demonstrates this need, even if in the form of an asymmetrical power relationship that prevents it going further. The critique of solidarity aspires to healthy relationships, free of power; relationships of partnership based on equality, parity, and internationalism.

The conditions are relatively favorable today for going

beyond solidarity, due to the presence in the West of many emigrants and refugees from troubled countries. In Germany, for example, there are more than half a million Syrians today, and in Turkey around three and a half million. But despite that, there are no spaces for mutual acquaintance and meetings and discussions, in which we could work as partners—though there do exist solidarity groups separate from, and hostile to, one another. This is because solidarity is selective and divisive by nature, tending toward vertical relationships between solidarity-providers and -recipients (Germans and Palestinians; Germans and Kurds; Germans and Syrians), rather than horizontal ones between diverse, equal partners.

From solidarity to partnership

In short, solidarity is unjust, whether as a relationship between its providers and recipients, or as one between different solidarity groups; that is if it's even possible for all the causes with which solidarity is expressed to be just, or rather if all those expressing the solidarity are just. To the extent that solidarity is a relationship between guardian and ward, the justice of it is akin to the justice of the "people of dhimma" systemArabic ahl al-dhimma, literally "the people of protection," referring in early Islamic times to certain non-Muslim peoples, chiefly Christians and Jews, who were offered the state's protection in return for paying a tax known as the jizya. It is essentially a relation of masters to subordinates, or conquerors to conquered. : impossible. The fact is that the solidarity market tends now to exert an opposite effect on solidarity-providers, reducing their fairness, or making them agents of discrimination

working to market their cause and suppress all others. The market works an opposite effect also on those causes which have already attained a sizeable share of the market, for they no longer accept being compared to other causes (solidarity with the Jews after the Holocaust, for instance).

What can counteract the solidarity that reproduces discrimination and injustice is partnership.

Building the concept of partnership requires critiquing solidarity, and going beyond it to the social and political conditions that made of it an alternative politics for a left that is ineffective, ignorant, and devoid of feeling. Solidarity is not the antithesis of the market, but rather a witness to its triumph and expansion, and not an effort to break free of West-centrism but rather an additional step toward its cementing, and the centralization of causes around the solidarity-providers “here” instead of around the deserving “over there.” Solidarity furnishes parochial recession in the West with a conscience free of scruples, and is unable to oppose the populist right-wing ascendance, which does not refrain in its turn from offering solidarity to immigrants, even if it prefers that they (or some of them, at least) return swiftly to their homelands, while favoring others among them on the basis of their identity. The selective structure of solidarity possesses nothing to oppose this, and rarely does its response go beyond saying that conditions are no longer suitable for refugees’ return to their countries.

Partnership, in contrast to solidarity, has no center; works in multiple directions rather than one; is based on equality rather than power; and is at odds with mutual competition, and the polarization that follows therefrom. It has the

potential to be a positive undertaking for the reality of global interconnectedness and an acceptance of the shared ownership of the world. Causes and cooperation are not located in two different worlds, as the ideology of solidarity implies. It is the same world, and the same one cause, even if its faces and expressions vary.

Non-centralized spaces of partnership, in which we meet as equals to get to know one another and exchange ideas and experiences, and work together—these are the progressive alternative to a capitalist marketplace for causes, and to a Darwinist conflict over solidarity that reproduces the relationships of discrimination that solidarity-providers are unable even to see.

What was valuable in the concept of solidarity was the framework of worldwide responsibility, breaking down the segregation of human pains from one another. What could retain this value is transcending solidarity to partnership in a world that today progressively forms a single framework of responsibility, but still provides levels of freedom and capability of utmost disparity.