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Shifting Solidarities in Volatile Times

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Crisis stricken Greece has seen a mushrooming of activities organized under the umbrella of solidarity (Rozakou 2016). A wide range of alternative economy experiments and forms of activism claim the term to stress the prevailing sense of mutuality and horizontality and the desire to overcome relations marked by inequality (Rakopoulos 2016). While Greece has been at the forefront of this resurgence, solidarity has also made a remarkable come-back in other sites. A term that seemed to be relegated to the dustbin of 1970s ideals, solidarity has shed its archaic image and has proven itself able to speak to new generations. In many places, the term has become associated with the promise of alternative engagements with injustice and inequality, and has emerged as the label of choice for small scale, practicable alternatives to an exploitative economic

order and glaring local and global inequalities (Juris 2008; Maeckelbergh 2011). This is not surprising, since solidarity is one of the central puzzles of our times, propelled by questions of whom to identify with and care for in a time of multiple economic, environmental and humanitarian injustices and crises in a deeply interconnected world.

Anthropologists have picked up on the resurgence of solidarity, studying how the term is invoked, what kind of practices are developed under its umbrella, and in opposition to what kinds of practices and relations it is shaped. This exciting, emerging body of research, mostly inspired by the Greek case, often takes a relativist, ethnographic stance, following how, for what purposes, and with what consequences the term is used. While appreciative of this approach, we argue that we

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may do well to look beyond specific invocations of solidarity in order to connect various domains and scales in which issues of solidarity are articulated.

This essay starts by defining what we understand by the term ‘solidarity’. This is followed by a discussion of reasons for the renewed urgency of solidarity. We then chart the various ways in which solidarity may present itself, and can be studied. We argue that questions of solidarity manifest themselves in three main guises – in everyday social relations, as part of structures of governance, and as a political trope and rallying cry, for example, in social movements – and that studying the interconnections between these guises of solidarity, articulated in different fields and at different scales, presents one of the main challenges of studying solidarity. How do changes in the one domain impact practices and ideas regarding solidarity in the other?

Defining solidarity

Solidarity is a fuzzy concept fraught with contradictions and frictions. While today it is mainly used with idealist connotations, ‘I stand with this or that cause’, solidarity may as well rely on self-interest. Welfare systems and insurances, for instance, are formalized forms of solidarity that start from a basic idea of reciprocity: I support someone in their misfortune now, since it may be me one day. Solidarity is often understood to signal a desired equality, but frequently starts from inexorable inequality, as when a trade union in Europe chooses to ‘stand’ with trade union activists in Central America, or relatively privileged volunteers opt to share the plight of refugees. Similarly, solidarity may

be used to bridge enormous distances and differences, or, may instead be an expression of a close-knit community. It may entail a call for inclusion of undocumented migrants, but it may also be used to sharpen and shore up the borders of communities.

From its inception, solidarity has been a central theme in the discipline of sociology, tasked as it was with understanding modern society. Debates on solidarity encompassed the crucial question of how modern society was held together. In *The Division of Labour*, first published in 1893, Émile Durkheim posited a shift from mechanical solidarity to organic solidarity. The mechanical solidarity that Durkheim saw as characteristic of traditional societies was based on similarities between people, in terms of modes of thinking and acting. Organic solidarity, in contrast, springs from diversification and specialisation of labour in modern societies, and arises from the functional interdependency and mutual complementarity (Komter 2005; Gofman 2014). In Durkheim’s conceptualization, solidarity could thus take the form of highly unequal relationships in the context of industrialized societies with elaborate divisions of labour.

Durkheim’s insights set the stage for studies of solidarity as an important condition for social order (most notably, Parsons 1952, 1977; Mayhew 1971). Another major debate in the literature on solidarity, influenced by rational choice theorists, aimed to explain why utility-maximizing human beings, who rationally calculate the utility and costs of their actions, opt to engage in solidary collective action (for example Hechter 1987; Coleman 1990; Juul 2014). Hechter (1987), for instance, states that true solidarity is only possible when the individual’s interests necessitate collective action or

responsibility, as humans will always opt for the alternative that is most likely to deliver maximum advantage.

Adopting elements of both arguments, Tania Li defined solidarity 'as union or fellowship arising from common responsibilities and interests'.¹ Li argued that solidarity could consist of 'community of feelings, with the stress on the affective dimension', and a 'community of responsibilities and interests, with the stress on functional interdependence'. She noted a growing disjuncture between these two dimensions due to the combination of, on the one hand, extraordinary global connectivity, with mass mediated images of suffering producing feelings of compassion, and, on the other, an increasing difficulty to envision how 'our interests are in fact linked'. According to Li, one of the keys to that puzzle is to acknowledge the political, cultural and organizational work needed to recognize mutual dependence: solidarity as work in progress. This conceptualization of solidarity presents a useful starting point for anthropological studies of solidarity. It leads us to ask what identifications and forms of interdependence are stressed and which ones are forgotten in order to shape particular forms and practices of solidarity.

In line with Li's argument, and in contrast to anthropological studies of solidarity that opt to forego definitions and instead focus on vernacular notions of solidarity, we propose a minimal definition of solidarity. We take solidarity to connote a recognition of communality or fellowship, and the willingness or obligation to act upon this recognition. Solidarity, in this broad, minimal definition, touches on core questions of the social: what are we prepared to do for others whom we identify as our fellows, and whom do we identify as

such? How are such connections and actions conceptualized and enforced (Komter 2005)?

Solidarity unhinged

Why have questions regarding communality, fellow feeling and the concomitant willingness to share or act regained such urgency? There are no doubt complex and locally specific reasons for the resurgence of solidarity as a trope. However, we think the renewed interest in solidarity has to be understood against the background of a volatile, unequal and deeply interconnected world. Dense flows of people, goods and ideas have resulted in a diversification of national populations and a high degree of global interconnectedness. These processes are, in turn, paralleled by a widespread restructuring of markets and governing institutions. Neoliberal reforms of state and society around the world rewrite social contracts between people and states, while global networks crisscross national borders and challenge established conceptions of socio-political relations and structures. In addition, war, global inequalities, climate change and the scarcity of natural resources have created a crisis prone global landscape, and cause people to search for safer, better lives elsewhere. These crises travel beyond specific sites and affected groups into people's living rooms and personal appliances, and to their doorsteps, becoming part of their life worlds. How solidarity is shaped and practiced in this volatile context has become an urgent question for many.

We argue that this is in part due to the increasingly fragile position of the nation-state as container for

social bonds and obligations. According to Wimmer and Glick Schiller (2002), the dominant social science model of society implies a container view. What they call the 'container model of society' implies a naturalized combination of four kinds of community. 'Society' is conceived as a political, ethnoracial, sociocultural and territorially bound community. This container model of society allows us, for instance, to speak of Dutch society as a bounded whole, with a particular ethnoracially demarcated population that by and large shares a culture, and lives in a clearly demarcated territory that is ruled by the Dutch state. As Wimmer and Glick Schiller convincingly argue, this container model of society infuses conceptualizations of (Western) society and the state in post WWII social sciences. It is also a powerful vernacular model that, for many people, frames what a functioning society is, where its boundaries are, and what are normal and normative relations between state and citizens, as well as among citizens. This model conceptualizes society as contained within and cut off at national borders, and helps frame migrants, border crossings and internal diversity as dangerous to the fabric of society (see also, for example, Stolcke 1995; Vertovec 2011).

Extrapolating Wimmer and Glick Schiller's insights to the theme of solidarity, we can see the centrality of the nation state to the organisation of solidarity in a number of respects: that of a polity or political community, in the sense of a community of citizens who collectively decide on their own governance, that of a social and ethnoracial community that shares a sense of kinship and cultural identifications, and that of a community in which resources are distributed. The nation-state, or (national) society, is in this sense

conceptualized as the natural container for political, ethnoracial, socio-cultural, economic (and to varying extent, religious) solidarity.

It is debatable whether the model ever was a good approximation of reality. However, due to the increasingly transnational character of economic networks and of governance structures and, most iconic, through migration flows, the past decades have seen the growth of glaring discrepancies between various aspects of society that were supposed to naturally cohere. It is a world that does not hold still for its national picture to be taken.

In line with the increasing lack of fit between the model and on the ground realities, the nation-state/container society seems increasingly less able to serve as a successful conceptual and organizational frame for solidarity (Compare with Oosterlynck et al. 2016). The increasing diversity of national populations is often seen to create problems with respect to the fabric of national society in terms of social cohesion, trust and solidarity. Growing diversity foregrounds a particular set of questions with respect to solidarity. What does solidarity look like in 'diverse' countries, cities and neighborhoods? What grounds for commonality and, thereby, solidarity, do people draw on in such contexts, and what ways do they find to live together 'with difference' (Valluvan 2016; Vasta 2010). Who belongs, and who can claim what rights become hotly debated questions. What happens to support for welfare state distribution in increasingly diverse settings (see, for example, Banting and Kymlycka 2006; Bauböck and Scholten 2016)? Can one sustain these types of redistribution when society, now conceptualized as a group of obligatory solidarity (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002), is

no longer clearly bounded, both externally, in terms of territorial borders, and internally, in terms of the presence of individuals who are identified as 'different' or 'foreign' (Oosterlynck et al. 2016)?

At the same time, in the context of neoliberal reforms and economic crises, many states redefine their role vis-à-vis citizens and society, stressing citizens' 'own responsibility' and mutual aid (van Houdt et al. 2011). These processes of state restructuring raise pertinent questions regarding solidarity at various levels, as will be discussed more extensively below. In response to, and in dialogue with, these governance efforts to redesign social responsibilities, numerous grassroots initiatives and social movements attempt to shape alternative forms of economic and social organization based on sharing and cooperation, from the flurry of sharing Apps, OuisShare initiatives to the Occupy movement (Juris 2008, 2012). Many such local initiatives open up to more international forms of activism and solidarity (Juris 2008).

Greece is a central site for the resurgence of solidarity, as various ethnographic studies of solidarity initiatives in Greece attest (see Rakopoulos 2016). In the context of the severe economic collapse and sharp cuts brought on by the enforced austerity politics, and in the context of the concurrent influx of refugees, solidarity has become a central organizing principle and rallying cry for Greeks who wanted to alleviate the situation of people in need, while also laying the basis for another type of community and society by creating forms of non-hierarchical sociality (Papataxiarchis 2017). As Rozakou (2016) notes, a marginal term in the early 2000s, in 2015 'solidarity' had become a

central term that seemed to capture a range of energies and projects in Greek society.

We also see the resurgence of solidarity as a trope in social movements that emerged in the last 20 years. With its association with more equal relations, solidarity, as a trope or rallying cry, suits an age of prefigurative politics and leaderless movements. Numerous social movements strive toward horizontal forms of organization, often without clear leaders, and many practice prefigurative politics to bring into existence new types of socialities that are, or could be, characterized as socialities of solidarity (Maekelbergh 2011; Rozakou 2016). The networked, mediated nature of many of these social movements reflects and acts upon the mediated forms of global connectedness that Tania Li flagged. This connectedness generates modes of intimacy with injustice and suffering in places near and far, and facilitates identification with causes, protests and movements across the globe (Juris 2012). 'Hashtag activism', activism on the internet and social media such as #Occupy or #BlackLivesMatter, has become a conspicuous form of political engagement, prominently, though not exclusively, in the form of statements of solidarity with movements, protests or causes across the globe (Bonilla and Rosa 2015).

Similarly, new actors that engage in development projects challenge established forms of international cooperation. Unconventional encounters between citizens who operate outside the more formal, institutionalised development sphere result in alternative approaches to international development or aid and new relations of international solidarity. We see, for instance, an increasing involvement of philanthropic foundations such as the Bill and Melissa Gates foun-

dation, a growing variety of individual initiatives across borders and a booming international volunteer movement (for example Simpson 2004).

Studying solidarity

How can we best capture these shifting formations and budding manifestations of solidarity? In contrast to a Durkheimian conceptualization of solidarity, recent anthropological studies generally focus on how solidarity is conceptualized and used, and what it is made to do. As Papataxiarchis (2017: 205) notes, 'Durkheimian solidarity contrasts with the highly agential meaning of the term "solidarity" ..., even the programmatic character of its use, in the current Greek context'. In current usage, solidarity is often taken to imply at least a gesture of equality, and even, as several studies of Greece demonstrate, a radical political alternative. It is often set up against and contrasted with relations that imply or enact inequality, for example in relations of hospitality between host and guest or between giver and recipient in charitable work (Rozakou 2012).

This conceptualization of solidarity leans to the more idealistic understanding of solidarity, underemphasizing or neglecting more self-interested or utilitarian aspects, such as those embodied and formalized in redistributive or insurance systems, as well as formations of solidarity based on unequal interdependence. It highlights idealistic, affectively laden acts at the expense of more self-interested motivations for engaging in solidarity or collective forms of solidarity that are enforced through redistributive systems like the welfare state. It also pays little attention to the type of solidarity

that Durkheim saw as the cement of society: a feeling of connectedness based on shared values, beliefs and identifications, as well as everyday contacts and immediate social networks (Gofman 2014).

While appreciating the deeply ethnographic engagement with solidarity in most studies, we want to propose that much can be gained by exploring the connections between questions of solidarity that are articulated in various domains and at different scales. Such an approach can grasp the complex, interconnected processes discussed above that have brought solidarity once more to the fore. In order to do such connective and comparative work, we need to hold on to a minimal definition of solidarity like the one we proposed earlier in this essay.

Solidarity, a recognition of fellowship and the willingness to act upon this recognition, has roughly been primarily studied in three guises: that of the unremarkable building block of society, of solidarity systems that arrange for the distribution of resources, and of moral appeals and collective action. These have, in general, been studied separately, by different disciplines or sub disciplines. The glue of society approach is key to a classic sociological approach that draws on Durkheim's legacy. Systems of distribution like those developed in the context of the welfare state have been the purview of political economy experts, while solidarity in the form of moral appeals and as practiced by social movements has been studied by political scientists and political sociologists. Anthropologists have also studied those domains, for instance through a focus on gift giving and reciprocity (Weiner 1992; See also Komter 2005), of saving associations or burial societies (Bähre 2007), and, as discussed above, of prefigurative politics

in various social movements. Most of these studies, however, also limit themselves to one specific manifestation of solidarity, at one particular scale.

Forms of, claims on and calls for solidarity are formulated at various scales and in different domains. At the level of the nation-state, solidarity may come to the fore as a bone of contention in public debates about the need for cultural assimilation of immigrants, while, in contrast, it may be debated as an economic issue when the rights of various categories of citizens to the welfare state are discussed. Solidarity may also be organized through formal or informal membership in a range of organizations such as the church, mosque or union, or in more floating forms of membership in 'neo tribes' (Bennett 1999). Calls for solidarity may also be articulated within family or neighbourhood networks, to help people in major life events – birth, marriage, death. Such calls draw on notions of relatedness, a term introduced by Janet Carsten (2000, 2003) to encompass various forms of kinship, whether they are based on blood or on other criteria. The term relatedness pushes us to ask what kind of relations establish a basis for solidarity, and how forms of relatedness and concomitant articulations of solidarity may shift over time. We may also discern forms of solidarity on a post-human level, in debates about climate change and the Anthropocene, and what this means for our relationship to nature. Expressions of solidarity in relation to the environment involve a range of interests and beliefs, producing often diverging allegiances to the land and clashing views of the part humans are seen to play in it. Climate change brings such disjunctive articulations of solidarity to a head in national as well international political arenas.

Our contention is that these various manifestations of solidarity are intimately related. They all entail material and affective claims regarding distribution and identification that interact with and impact claims made in other domains or at other scales. With their eclectic and bottom-up approach, anthropological studies are well suited to map such situated, thick instances of multiscale and multidimensional manifestations of solidarity.

We thus propose a multiscale and multidimensional approach to solidarity, one that integrates anthropology's current focus on solidarity as a vernacular trope with attention to solidarity as a basic, often unarticulated, feature of society, while also acknowledging the organization of solidarity in the form of redistributive systems. We argue that taking account of the various domains and scales at which questions of solidarity are articulated helps us understand how solidarity is produced at the intersection of the everyday and the extraordinary, unspoken norms and political rallying cries, and of idealistic, voluntaristic actions and institutionalized systems.

A multidimensional approach

The usefulness of a less compartmentalized, more multiscale and multidimensional approach to solidarity is demonstrated by James Ferguson's *Give a Man a Fish*. Ferguson (2015) provides us with a compelling picture of interconnected transformations of solidarity across scales and social domains. He discusses the new politics of distribution in neoliberal South Africa where large sections of the population are surplus to

the needs of capital. In this case, a 'rightful share' of (national) resources, rather than the exchange of labour for money in the market, becomes the grounds for providing people with a modicum of an income (see Li 2010 for a related argument). Ferguson insightfully explores how South African social protection schemes impact local relations of reciprocity and dependence, among other things by increasing the value and standing of recipients of such schemes: the children, elderly or disabled. As political mobilization puts pressure to further such forms of redistributive politics, solidarities at close quarters may shift further along these lines.

Closer to (our) home, we may ask how the ideological call for new forms of care for self and others in the context of neoliberal reforms of the welfare state resonates with people's senses of solidarity and mutual obligation. And how do structural changes in service provision and welfare resources impact the everyday, unspoken ways in which people organize their social relations? Take the *participatiesamenleving*, 'participation society'. This is a Dutch version of the UK 'big society' and exemplary of the neoliberal communitarian thinking that van Houdt et al. (2011) see as a central tenet of governance in a number of European countries. In September 2013, Dutch King Willem-Alexander launched the term in his annual speech on behalf of the sitting government. It was meant to signal that citizens should take on more responsibilities, and find solutions to their problems in their own social networks, rather than expecting the state to step in. The term captures a much longer process of welfare state restructuring in the Netherlands over the last decades (Delsen 2016).

This political and policy frame can be seen as the

successor of the 'public management' wave in the Netherlands. Rather than the singular focus on efficiency and accountability that marked the 1990s, the *participatiesamenleving* stresses active citizenship and *eigen kracht* (literally: one's own strength, i.e. a strengths perspective). It is a major effort to rewrite the existing contract between state and citizens, both in terms of existing welfare infrastructure and facilities, and in conceptual terms, redefining expectations and obligations (see Newman and Tonkens 2011; Kampen et al. 2013). Such re-arrangements draw on, and reconfigure, everyday forms of solidarity that spell out mutual obligations among family, friends and neighbours. As sociologists Jan Willem Duyvendak and Evelien Tonkens rhetorically asked in an op-ed (*NRC*, 11 May 2013): 'Who wants to be bathed by their neighbor?' In the context of the *participatiesamenleving*, everyday solidarities become the object of governance in a bid to reconfigure responsibilities and expectations between citizens and the state.

The *participatiesamenleving* and an active citizenship policy frame interact in interesting ways with grass-roots initiatives that work on local forms of solidarity (de Wilde and Duyvendak 2016). In the reshuffling of budgets, facilities and responsibilities, many municipalities allocate a part of their budget to citizen initiatives. This leads to an intricate mixing of positions of state and citizens, governing and being governed. Some initiatives may in name be citizens' initiatives, while they are, in fact, initiated or aided by professionals specialized in facilitating active citizenship (Tonkens 2015). In a similarly ironic turn, prefigurative projects that aim to develop solidary economic systems as alternatives to the existing neoliberal order, such as locally

devised exchange economies and currencies or communal neighbourhood projects, are regularly hailed as exemplary of a desired active citizenship and the *participatiesamenleving*, and may be sustained by their co-optation into governmental programs or subsidies.

Active citizenship frames are not elastic, however. The case of *De Valreep*, a squatted building in Amsterdam that functioned as an alternative subcultural site and as an improvised community centre, shows the limits of how citizen initiatives will be co-opted, facilitated or even tolerated. During the run-up to the 2014 municipal elections, the savvy team of *De Valreep* posted ironic spoofs of actual election materials, which framed the squat as every party's pet project, particularly by portraying it as an example of effective self-organization and community care. Despite their ingenious campaign and extensive neighbourhood program, *De Valreep* was evicted in June 2014. The building now houses a restaurant that caters to the neighbourhood's affluent middle class demographic.

Concluding thoughts

Solidarity has shed its passé reputation and has made a comeback as an umbrella term for a range of political projects and actions. The term fits ideas regarding horizontal organization and prefigurative politics, and is often used to express a desire for more egalitarian, horizontal relations than, for instance, those created in humanitarianism or in regular economic exchanges. We have situated the resurgence of solidarity against the background of the increasing mismatch between the container society model, which presumes a neat

overlap between people, state and territory, and more mobile and globally connected realities on the ground. This has lent questions of solidarity renewed urgency, for instance around access to welfare, with respect to the rights of illegalized migrants, or in the form of people's involvement with various social and political causes elsewhere. We argue that in order to study these varied articulations of solidarity, we would do well to adopt a multidimensional and multiscalar approach that takes account of the various guises in which solidarity presents itself and of how changing configurations of solidarity in one site impact questions of solidarity at other scales or in other domains. Such an approach can bring into view how governmental projects draw on everyday senses of social obligation whilst co-opting projects that had hoped to realize alternative socialities and economies. But we may also see the emergence of combative politics of solidarity out of unspoken forms of everyday solidarity.

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Notes

- 1 Keynote lecture at the launch of the Radboud Master's program on 'Shifting Solidarities' (Nijmegen, 18 February 2016). We rely on Li's extensive lecture notes, which she kindly provided.

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