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Europe's Crisis: Reconsidering Solidarity with Leela Gandhi and Judith Butler

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Europe's Crisis: Reconsidering Solidarity with Leela Gandhi and Judith Butler

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for William V. Spanos, who has shown the way

The idea called Europe is important. It deserves loving and nourishing care to grow well and to return its promise. It is a visionary idea shared by winners and losers of World War II, by survivors of the Nazi-Fascist regimes and the Shoah, by large and small countries. It is still little more than just an idea: so far, it has only yielded the suspension of inner wars among the states that became members of the European Union. It is only a germ. Yet, its achievement is outstanding: in the face of the incessant proliferation of wars around the globe, it has secured lasting peace to an increasing number of nations since the 1950s.

The idea called Europe is also vague. It has pursued its aim of ending the frequent and bloody wars between neighbours mainly through economic ties, as the Treaty of Maastricht's failure to promote shared policies underscores. For over half a century, its common policies have been manifestly insufficient and inadequate. It is indeed still only a germ. And its limitations are tremendous: in the face of the rising threats to its own idea of peaceful cohabitation, of the internal rise of violent and hateful forces of sovereignty, of policies of domination, discrimination and exclusion, it is incapable of keeping Europe's own promise.

Such limitations are tangible in the debate about Grexit and the decision regarding Brexit, as well as in the political turn towards totalitarianisms in multiple states. The controversial and much discussed possible exits from the EU of the economically weakest and the financially strongest member states are just the liberal poles of a range of obscurantist actions that work against the growth of the democratic idea of Europe. Greece would be forced to re-invent the Drachma,

because it cannot comply with EU economic regulations; Britain and its Pound Sterling has decided to leave the EU to compete solo in the global economy, despite the privileges enjoyed by being part of EU up to now. Without Greece, Europe loses some of its cultural foundational identity. Without Britain, Europe loses some of its financial competitive edge. This symbolic binary is clearly an unacceptable simplification, which denies the UK's cultural input and Greece's material contribution. Yet, by leading the main reasoning and actions of the EU in the past years, this dichotomous simplification has morphed into an undermining conundrum.

Embraced and undeniably paralysed by such opposition, the European conundrum clearly reveals the roots of its own fragility —the incapacity to conjugate culture and politics with economics. I offer the speculation that this conundrum may result from Europe's reliance on a traditional concept of solidarity. R. Radhakrishnan invites us to consider which one, of all the different bearers of solidarity such as class, culture, political ideology, race, and ethnicity, is to be stressed, and when and why, so that we may be able to map a different cartography of global relationality. I too strongly believe that in order to overcome the present tragic impasse, the utmost intellectual and pragmatic care must be devoted to relationality. I understand relationality in feminist terms. In addition to nourishing relational subjectivities, as advocated for decades by feminist theory, we need to envision, recognize, and name the tensions and frictions, as well as the sharing and creativity that define relational collectivities, as recommended by feminist postcolonial queer studies. I suggest that this mapping requires a revision of the concept of solidarity. Solidarity has been traditionally conceived within a dualistic paradigm that we may be able to recast in the light of the theories offered by Judith Butler and Leela Gandhi with the aim to overcome Europe's present deadlock.

Europe was declaredly born out of the will of its founders for solidarity. As stated in the "Preamble" to the Treaty of Rome (25 March 1957), the intention is "to confirm the solidarity which binds Europe and the overseas countries"; the desire is "to ensure the development of their prosperity, in accordance with the principles of the Charter of the United Nations"; the resolution is "to preserve and strengthen peace and liberty" (2). It is hard to disagree with such enlightened values based on the principle of solidarity. The question is what meanings does the word *solidarity* convey? It is worth recalling the history of the usage of this term.

The word's classical rooting is in the juridical Latin phrase in *solidum obligari*, referring to the obligation to pay one's debt in full. Therefore, in *solidum* means

first of all entire, complete, whole. Two words in Italian derive from *in solidum* and carry its second related meaning: *soldo* (money) and *soldato* (soldier), referring to a person who in the Middle Ages would fight for money. These two words carry the meaning of solid, compact, robust. The classical rooting thus links solidarity to the law —specifically to money, in full, and to soldiers, robustly (*solidarietà* in *Enciclopedia Treccani*). It was not until the French Revolution that the modern rooting of solidarity came to be founded in social and ethical values. After 1789 the word solidarity came into modern English (and also modern Italian) from the French *solidarité*, stretching its meaning from the classical juridical and economic to the ideological semantic field. Only at this point in time, it came to indicate the nationalist feeling of fraternity shared by citizens within democracy, associated with political freedom and equality. Soon afterwards, its semantic field was further enlarged to include ethics: in 1848, social solidarity was coupled with class solidarity, and the word solidarity acquired ethical status with the related meaning of mutual help. The translation from French into English for the Chartist Convention of the International Workers Movement sealed this passage. *Solidarité* / Solidarity came to indicate support for a common struggle for labour and civil rights; it signified more than community because it extended to foreigners, and more than philanthropy because the help was given on the grounds of the others, not one's own. The modern rooting thus links solidarity to community —specifically to the democratic nation, in fraternity, and to the working classes world-wide, in camaraderie.

Within socialist ideology, solidarity expresses equality based on mutual trust; the word constellates the major literature, from Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels to Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (*solidarity* in *Encyclopedia of Marxism*). The sociologist Émile Durkheim articulates a theory of social solidarity, defined as organic, which, on the liberal front, is defended by John Maynard Keynes as a basis of the welfare state. This liberal adaptation shifts the action of the concept of solidarity from the free social movements to the structured state. In our time, within contemporary globalisation, solidarity expresses the dream for a humanity that is commonly shared; it is associated with love and charity; solidarity culture refers to the voluntary work to help the needy but also to the organisms for international collaboration that seek peace and human rights. Clearly within modernity, the concept of social solidarity, national and international, is deeply rooted in politics. As such, solidarity configures rather as a proposition than as a concept, in a way that is comparable to Étienne Balibar's proposition of *egaliberté*, understood as an aporetic condition that is rooted in bourgeois ideology but has a revolutionary

potential, that is universal and pragmatic, a tension that determines the political field within which popular sovereignty without exclusions may occur. Hauke Brunkhorst's *Solidarity: From Civic Friendship to a Global Legal Community* theoretically and historically analyses the potential of solidarity within globalisation and argues for a transnational civic solidarity rooted in social movements and normed by democratic institutions.

However, the classical rooting in economics and law in Europe's solidarity has not been severed. This double rooting, technical and nominal on the one hand, ideological and material on the other, raises a question: when we perceive a society as solidary, does its solidity derive from its budget or from its ethics? To reiterate: does a solid society guarantee that it is also a solidary society? To put it otherwise: is the material physical solid body of a solid society capable of opening itself to the risk of open mutual reciprocity? To recap it in yet different terms: is a society that we consider solid and solidary an ethical society, one that refers to human behaviour performed in relation, to collective action, to the intercultural exchange that produces shared meanings and values? Europe has not offered solid answers to these questions. Europe appears to be understanding solidarity schizophrenically, unable to join its foundational modern ideal with its classical praxis.

Europe's consciously declared foundations rest on the modern *solidum*, that is the dream of ethical grounding, as a political response to the deep fractures that had afflicted its peoples for so long, and so catastrophically, in the 20th century. It solidly sits on its invocation of solidarity against war. However, it has mostly yielded solidarity as economic cooperation, a *solidum* in its most classical meaning, whose solidity is grounded on solidarity for money only. Since 2004, following the terrorist attacks in Madrid, Europe has further reinforced the principle of such classical understanding of cooperation with the introduction of the Solidarity clause (Art. 222) to The Treaty of Lisbon. The accent easily and classically slid from *soldo* / money to *soldato* / soldier, by invoking "a spirit of solidarity" to "act jointly" with the specification that the "Union shall mobilise all the instruments at its disposal, including the military resources" if "a Member State is the object of a terrorist attack or the victim of a natural or man-made disaster". Thus, the institutionalisation of Europe became increasingly solidly founded on the classical *solidum* of money and force, while the modern *solidum* of mutual social and moral support became increasingly confined to its merely rhetorical original promise. This is why, when faced with the Greek economic crisis, the EU proved incapable of displaying the modern *solidum* declared in its own founding document —the

solidarity of social sharing and mutual help. Europe's embrace of the classical economic *solidum* appears to have dissolved its own constitutional principle rooted in the modern social and ethical *solidum*. Such amnesia, Europe's incapacity to express social solidarity for its weakest members while pursuing economic solidarity for the strongest ones, unsurprisingly matches its incapability to enact solidarity for human rights when faced with the repeating tragedy of migrants and refugees, weak constituencies of labour and asylum seekers coming from the outside.

I am speculating that by casting the concept of solidarity within a binary rooting economical-technical vs. social-ideological, Europe may have culturally embedded its own paralysis. The technical and the ideological appear mutually irreducible, which prevents us from conceiving a middle ground where relations become possible. It may preclude us from imagining a field on which to act. It causes the foreclosure of the political. Within this frame, the technical is assumedly neutral, while the ideological is disembodied. Their irreducibility bans both imagination and agency, the poetical and the political without which change is impossible. I am arguing that a solidarity etymologically conceptualised as an exclusive binary — either the classical material or the modern ideal— may concur to deterring its own political enactment, including also the enactment of a political economy without which even the minimal achievement of a monetary cooperation is significantly weakened.

I would like to add a further consideration. I see an additional shortcoming in the solidarity of Europe's origin: it was generated by a commonality against wars among Member States. By conceiving the modern ideal of sharing as a form of giving help, which entails a giver and a receiver, an active and a passive actor, Europe planted its solidarity within the active matrix of a collective constituency shaped by pulling its forces *against* an emergency —the devastation of war and totalitarianisms. It is precisely in this negativity of Europe's birth, a birth *against* rather than *for*, that I detect a fundamental, possibly fatal limitation. Seventy years since its emergency, it is no longer a sufficient *raison d'être* that Europe merely exists *against* inner wars among its Members. Today Europe is urgently called to face the challenge of being capable not only of working *against* inner wars but also of working *for* transnational peace. Its own existence is at stake. The question Europe must now face is: can its founding concept of solidarity be conceived as *solidarity for* and not just *solidarity against*; can its solidarity nourish being solidal *for* —for peace instead of just against war, for humanitarian collaboration instead of just monetary competition against other currencies?

Unfortunately, the signs are not reassuring: Europe seems to be falling apart when called on to deliver its solidarity both for Greece, an inside member state, and for the refugees, outside humanity. The day Britain voted to exit the EU, 4,500 people were rescued in the Mediterranean near Sicily. Since the Schengen agreement, the estimated number of dead from attempted sea-crossings to date is at least 35,000—a figure that evokes the estimated “sixty million and more” (Toni Morrison) of the Black Atlantic and produces another catastrophic image, that of the Mediterranean Cemetery.

An alternative mold for understanding solidarity relationally and reciprocally can be located in the ideas of radical democracy as defined by Leela Gandhi and in the concept of vulnerability as defined by Judith Butler. Considered together, these ideas help me conceptualise solidarity otherwise, and I want to hope more effectively, in the light of the present European impasse and bleak expectations. We need desperately, I believe, to couple the awareness that the “Greek Crisis is Europe's Crisis is Global Crisis,” as in the title of our panel, with the dream that Europe's solidarity for peace in the world, for nonviolent civic society becomes a possibility. This original dream looked possible again not too long ago, when the Berlin wall fell, but now that too many walls are being built around Europe and across the Mediterranean the dream has turned into fear—fear by and of Europe. I would go as far as saying, without apologies, that we need to take the responsibility to propose another utopia, and I hope that this new utopia may be pursued by engaging propositional, risk-taking thinking. The circumstances urge us to relinquish the luxury of merely thinking negatively, an inadequacy that has characterised leftist thinking (and acting) to the point of paralysis, a negativity that has diluted into nothing and given space to the proliferation of obscurantist forces. Gandhi's conceptualisation of a community of affects (*Affective Communities*) sharing the common good through an ethics of imperfection (*Common Good*) and a politics of becoming minor (“Utonal Life”) offers me the opportunity to envision the goal. What further encourages me to undertake the task is Butler's definition of solidarity as a “a mode of sustaining conflict in politically productive ways, a practice of contestation” that produces a culture capable of exposing the “self-difference” at the core of each political position (“Merely Cultural” 37). I am also inspired by her articulation of vulnerability, in particular the one specified in “Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance” where Butler underlines that vulnerability is relational and necessary for thinking resistance.

I would reiterate that we need a utopia that is not ideal and perfect, but rather one that may take place, albeit imperfectly, in this world, here and now—an

incongruously possible utopia. And, I would add with enthusiasm, that Gandhi's nonviolent thinking helps me picture such paradox. The new utopia I am calling for is not grounded on ideology but is rather differently and temporarily articulated day after day, through the one-to-one relationships that each person shapes in their interaction with other persons, in the name of the common good that is defined by our living on this planet. This is a utopia in the plural —utopias articulated in multiple languages and from different locations yet seeking a common language. Each one is a fragment whose relations with other fragments produce a coming together, an assembly that may lead, perhaps surprisingly, possibly imperfectly, even magically at times, towards the desired change.

Gandhi helps me think about this change positively and radically through her persuasive philosophical articulation of radical democracy, as nonviolent practice, ahimsatic mode, utonal life, and postcolonial historiography. Her call for becoming less in order to relate to each other as ordinary people, for accepting imperfection in order to counter the totalitarian, colonial, and liberal frame of domination, leads us to build a nonviolent society —neither a luxury nor an option in the face of Europe's paralysis. At the centre of her "politics of friendship" is the Derridean notion of hospitality, which allows Gandhi to declare that such politics yields a sociality within which guest-friends are never known in advance. This is radical relational subjectivity. Acting under such conditions of unconstituted subjecthood requires countercultural revolutionary practices and inventive ethical enterprises (*Affective Communities* 9). It requires us to deploy "solidarities" that "simply cannot be fixed in advance" and "a utopian mentality" that shows the way forward to a genuine cosmopolitanism: always open to the risky arrival of those not quite, not yet, covered by the privileges which secure our identity and keep us safe" (*Affective Communities* 31). The fierce activism that Gandhi invokes embraces a solidarity that takes the risk of affective incongruous relations among subjects who pursue self-ruination. This pursuit requires a politics that is also a poetics, a counter-narrative that does not repress desire and imagination in order to pursue cognition and justice. Gandhi is clear on this point when she shows that, without poetics, politics is reduced to utilitarian joylessness (*Affective Communities* 142-76). On the contrary, a joyful poetics / politics, in my understanding, allows us to envision a middle ground between the monetary and the ethical within which solidarity may act materially and ethically.

I hear an echo of this positioning in Butler's "Merely Cultural," where she suggests that solidarity should not be based on the obliteration of the differences between identities, but rather on the "synthesis of a set of conflicts" and invokes "a

practice of contestation” within which each political position discloses its own “self-difference” and does not pursue identitarian assimilation (37). Thus conceived, solidarity becomes a cultural production capable of turning conflict into positive politics. Further, in *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Butler talks about an ethos of solidarity as a force that affirms mutual, reciprocal dependency. This proposition takes us beyond the conception of social solidarity rooted in modernity and allows us to see that ethical questions are always implicated in economic ones (22). When we act together under conditions that are devastating, Butler argues, it is precisely “the gathering of bodies under duress” that has the value of “persistence and resistance” (23). Thus, Butler is inviting us to think about vulnerability and agency together, to think about bodies that are actively and inactively supported both by infrastructures and social solidarity.

Butler considers feminist action as the action by subjects regarded as more vulnerable and yet subjects who seek a politics that prevents them from being targeted as vulnerable (Chapter IV). She shows how precarity and vulnerability may become agency, and may express new forms of democracy and solidarity through spontaneous public gathering of bodies that show their capacity to act without deliberating in advance their force for resistance. By putting the body at the centre of solidarity, I understand that Butler liberates philosophy from being confined to the realm of the intellectual as opposed to the physical, from banning sensibility in the name of sense, from being locked up within the merely conceptual, and frames a philosophy that allows the mind to be part of the body. As such, it also allows subjectivity to be framed outside the Eurocentric Humanistic tradition which, as Rosi Braidotti well demonstrates in her call for the posthuman, equates the Subject, the Self with consciousness, universal rationality, and self-regulating ethical behaviour, and the Other with the sexualised, racialised, and naturalised, less than human, disposable bodies.

Butler's definition of agency joined with vulnerability is revolutionary because it may provide a way out of the solidarity conundrum in which Europe, with/out Greece and Britain, is presently stuck. Moya Lloyd is particularly clear when she illustrates that Butler articulates not merely a concept of vulnerability, but rather a politics of vulnerability. This opens up a space, which is irreducibly corporeal, where bodies appear to other bodies to act in concert by virtue of their ethical responsiveness rather than any aprioristic recognition of their individual existence. This implication in the lives of others leads to an understanding of ethics as always responsive, relational, and collective. Thus politics, presented by Butler as possible under conditions of precarity, has the power “to contest the terms of

recognisability that position certain lives as precaritized and unintelligible” (Lloyd 224).

I thereby understand the resistance of the vulnerable to be a form of critique performed by bodily encounters. Such bodies claim recognition within the public sphere and in the process reconstitute it. Their encounters operate successfully only under principles of nonviolence. Precisely within the nonviolent paradigm that Leela Gandhi so finely articulates for radical democracy, I think, solidarity can be recast as *ahimsa* or self-ruination, as the willingness to become less in order to relate. This model allows for relations to no longer stand in hierarchical order—neither dictatorially through domination nor liberally through generosity (*Common Cause* 10). Such relations, Gandhi contends, are not between Self and Other, but are rather exchanges among singularities who seek inclusiveness through affects, exchanges among differences who are performed under conditions of equality; they are ruled by a politics of friendship and linked together by affiliations.

Clearly this conceptualisation challenges forms of subjecthood, both individual and national, based on the masculinist grounding of domination and exclusion, on posing an Other. It requires the joining of the cultural and the social performed by a poetical politics and a political poetics that speaks in multiple languages, inhabits borders, and does not categorise people according to abstract taxonomies. A radical democracy embraces an ethics of imperfection in its pursuit of community on a one-to-one basis. The ‘people’ in radical democracy become a temporary, fragmented, yet powerful constituency through the sharing of their own gathering, unlike the ideal disembodied entity they have been reduced to within liberal representative democracy. Subjecthood within this paradigm can only be relational and therefore feminist, non-normative.

Gandhi’s heuristic epistemology entails anarchism, disobedience, no-saying, imperfection, the staging of nonviolent militancy. Within anti-colonial socialist, anarchist, feminist communities it seeks spiritual and political practices of becoming less; it studies historical cases in which people managed to pursue horizontal infinity by blocking the continuation of war and the perpetration of colonialism. Gandhi argues that these nonviolent practices are always a work in progress, incomplete and imperfect; they are always non-normative, never utilitarian. This is precisely what makes them profoundly democratic. Most importantly, she specifies in her “*Lectio Magistralis*,” sometimes they are not even pacifist: sometimes nonviolence must respond to violence through civil disobedience. These practices are not lead by any ethics of virtue that pursues the

fullness of the subject. Rather, they are distinguished by an ethical commitment to the revolutionary ordinariness of the social contract.

Nonviolence thus is defined not as the opposite of violence, nor is peace inflected as other from war, but rather as a practice of becoming, as the rejection of any hierarchical categorisation and the abdication of power. Nonviolence embraces negativity by asking men to renounce to their own masculinity and by encouraging women to cultivate their own no-saying in order to take better care of the world, to say that no, we are not yet done with radical democracy. Nonviolence is a practice of civil disobedience. Only by rejecting the perfectionism that joins fascism, imperialism, and liberalism to democracy, Gandhi argues, can democracy cease to be a utopia and become a possibility. It can become the possible utopia, the possible eternity of speaking a common language and being ordinary in the sense of being in common with others. Through ahimsatic nonviolence we can all have a glimpse of the horizontal infinity at the centre of our mortality—the only possible immortality we can dream of (*Lectio Magistralis* 21). Within a likewise frame, Butler envisions solidarity as the carrier of the revolutionary force of relational ethics expressed by vulnerable bodies who assemble publicly to become a constituency. Relationality both for Gandhi and for Butler is conceived as subject formation; their politics/poetics yields hope for transformation precisely because it is not functionally grounded on pre-constituted identities.

I like to hope that conceiving solidarity as ethical ordinariness and vulnerability may offer Europe the cultural means to face the dramatic challenges of the present. Since the crisis presents us not only with economic and political risks but also with the limitation of classical Humanism and most compellingly with humanitarian catastrophes, I trust that engaging such forms of thinking differently is more than an academic exercise and may yield some practical transformation.

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