Solidarity in a Society of Strangers

Modernisation is an ambivalent process. Many people don't feel at home with its outcome. So besides a more philosophical argumentation to abandon this project (Postmodernism) or to control it (reflective modernisation) there is the political and moral claim to revive older elements of social life.

In this debate on Communitarianism we find arguments ranging from conservative to liberal. But instead of taking part in that discussion directly, it seems more rewarding to take a second look at the diagnosis of modern society. Is it really the case that under postmodern circumstances solidarity is so unlikely?

The argumentation put forward in the following text consists of three steps:

At first I want to show in which sense one can say that we live among strangers.

Secondly I will give a short description of one aspect of the debate on solidarity and community.

Thirdly my main point will be to look at the problem of solidarity by reflecting on what strangers are. On the basis of these insights the question of solidarity in modern society will appear in a new light.

1. The Stranger Next Door

It is out of question that in modern societies and especially in the big cities people come in contact with many others whom they don't know or are not familiar with. Quite often the relationship between them is not really personal but only functional: "Urbanites meet one another in highly segmental roles" (Wirth 1938: 12). Following Louis Wirth the urban "way of life" is characterized by the "coincidence of close physical contact and distant social relations" (Wirth 1938: 1; 14). So today physical and social proximity do not overlap like in former times in small scale groups. "No single social group has the undivided allegiance of the individual", with the result that the traditional basis of social solidarity is undermined (Wirth 1938: 16; 21). Characteristic for the modern way of life therefore is the presence of strangers next to us. We can say with Zygmunt Baumann that "strangers are neither neighbors nor aliens or rather they are both. Aliens within physical reach. Neighbors outside social reach" (Baumann1993: 153). Although physical distance
between people may be short, the social distance may grow. One way to keep up social distance is discrimination of others, but in the most cases the great social distance is outcome of unintended or unconscious processes. In his "Postmodern Ethics" Baumann proposed a threefold classification of social spaces, which may help to analyse these processes in more detail. He distinguishes between cognitive, aesthetic and moral spacing. "Cognitive space is constructed intellectually by acquisition and distribution of knowledge. Aesthetic space is plotted affectively by attention guided by curiosity and the search for experiential intensity. Moral space is constructed through an uneven distribution of felt/ assumed responsibility" (Baumann 1993: 145f, emphasis mine). Together with the orientation in social space constructed on these three levels, people require and use a special technique in their everyday social life, which Baumann calls "mismeeting" (1993: 154). With this term he wants to express that we don't live together with our fellow citizens, but quite often pay no attention to them even if they are nearby. So it happens that large parts of potentially social space is de-socialized and we live in semantically empty spaces (1993: 158).

The question arises what may hold together such a kind of society? Some kind of solidarity?

2. Solidarity Without Community

Early sociologists saw the problems of modern urban society (locus classicus is Simmel 1903). Since it is not possible here to look at their theories more closely I want to confine myself to some short reflections on the term "solidarity". Taking some recent German articles on solidarity as reference (see Bayertz 1998) one can distinguish between a strong and a weak idea of solidarity: On one hand it seems to mean "obligation", on the other only "relationship"; in one sense "dependence", in an other sense "connexion"; in a strong sense "responsibility", in a weaker sense only "mutual assistance". The strong idea is centered on the aspect of morality, whereas the weak idea has its focus in reciprocity. This may be a normative prescription as well but at the same time it has got the potential to be used as an analytical concept. The strong idea of solidarity seems to be connected with an older kind of solidarity consisting in a relationship between like persons or with the social tie in a community.

The weak idea on the other hand seems to be connected with a new kind of solidarity - that between different persons who do not belong to the same community. For such a kind of solidarity to be possible there may be at least three presuppositions:

1. Everyone should have the ability to stand in reflexive distance to his own group.
2. Each person must have equal rights.
3. Every person must have a certain degree of openmindedness. This suggests a kind of "modernisation of solidarity" parallel with the process of social modernisation. It was Talcott Parsons who claimed exactly this. He distinguishes a premodern "solidarity with friends" from the modern "solidarity with strangers". As main characteristics he saw affectivity, collective orientation, and particularism prevail in the premodern kind, whereas in the modern kind affective neutrality, a balance of self-orientation and collective orientation, and pluralism guide people's actions (Parsons 1964: 67). Parsons described the modern kind of solidarity by the example of functional roles like teacher or doctor only (Parsons/ Platt 1973; Brunkhorst 1997: 72f). He presented no argument why there should be solidarity with strangers in everyday life and throughout the social system. In addition to that, I think we can find more than two kinds of solidarity when we look at the changes in history. To see this we have to turn back to the theories of Ferdinand Tönnies and Emile Durkheim.

Both Tönnies and Durkheim wanted to describe how an older form of social organisation and integration loses ground and comes to exist together at the same time with a new form. Because they put forward detailed arguments for the decline of the older form they were very often misinterpreted in the sense that they described a historical succession or consecution. This was the more so in the case of Tönnies. Taking Hobbes as starting point of his thought he presented a kind of voluntaristic argument in which modern society ("Gesellschaft") is seen as product of a social contract held together only by "mechanical solidarity". In contrast, in premodern community ("Gemeinschaft") we have a naturally grown "organical solidarity" (Tönnies 1957). Reading Tönnies after and with Spencer, Durkheim took the categories "organical" and "mechanical" as descriptive concepts but he reversed their evolutionary order. Because he wanted to stress that in traditional societies solidarity develops automatically he called it "mechanical solidarity" and distinguished it from "organic solidarity" characteristic for modern societies. For him it were the processes of social distribution of labour, individualisation and liberalisation which made this kind of solidarity possible (Durkheim 1984). Durkheim’s argument with the distribution of labour may not be very plausible any more, but his idea that solidarity could be the result of reflexion of the individuals on their role or position in society still is useful. We only have to take into account that this self-reflexion can have varying degrees. So we might describe intermediary or mixed forms of solidarity. If we refine Durkheims categories in that way and distinguish four types of solidarity we can describe the historical changes much better and even see more clearly with regard to our present situation:

1. In premodern times and outside Europe there indeed prevailed something like "mechanical solidarity", though there may always have existed some degree of "organic solidarity" as well. Since
the eighteenth century *traditional mechanical solidarity* loses ground in Europe and up came two new kinds:

2. an *organized and institutionalized mechanical solidarity*, we find in Nationalism, Totalitarianism or even the Mafia (see Blok 1972). Helmuth Plessner revealed the ideology of community inherent in Fascism and Marxism (Plessner 1924). He presented an argument from Philosophical Anthropology, saying that human beings would not like to be absorbed in a community, but that they set great value on discretion and tact. It may be that Plessner only generalized the bourgeois individual but nevertheless we can find many examples in Cultural Anthropology showing discretion as a result of ritualized social interaction (e.g. joking relationship; see also Clifford Geertz’ analysis of the Balinese cockfight as symbolically acting out conflicts and reconfirming social structure [Geertz 1972]).

3. an *organized and institutionalized organic solidarity*, we can find in Protestant Churches, Corporalism or Unionism and which in some form had been proposed by Durkheim himself as a solution to the problem of social integration.

Both of these kinds of solidarity have been criticized by Richard Sennett as "the fall of public man" (Sennett 1977). He showed that acting in public until the 19th century meant playing roles or wearing masks and how this changed with the demand to reveal "the true self" in interactions.

4. With the ongoing individualization since the 1960s there may come up a *reflexive solidarity* which shows itself in deliberate social engagement and in the great protest movements. The people taking part in here don't act out of some prescriptive norm of solidarity. They are motivated by themselves and because they sense that they gain something from this kind of solidarity.

This new kind of solidarity that is strongly based on individuals can not be appreciated if we still think of community as a basis for solidarity. In my opinion the problem with Communitarianism is that some of its advocates cling too strong to the idea of institutionalization of solidarity in connection with a community. Most of them are too critical of Individualism because they look at it in its connection to Economic Liberalism (on "classical" Individualism see Machan 1998). But as many cases in Europe show there can be high degrees of Individualism while Liberalism is limited in some way (think of the Welfare State or Social Democracy). It is as well of great use to distinguish a debate on moral and social philosophy from a debate on political theory (see Mulhall/ Swift 1997). Nevertheless individualization is an ambivalent process. It has its gains and losses for both the individual and society. To give a reason why I am rather optimistic that there will be some degree of truely "reflexive solidarity" in the near future let us look at the stranger with whom we have to feel solidarity.
3. De-Constructing the Stranger

In my doctoral dissertation I considered the word "stranger" starting with linguistic reflections on the sole German word "fremd" (Saalmann in press). These reflections may not be so obvious in the English language because it has got three or four words - foreign, strange, alien and other. But I think one can show that in English there are *five aspects of meaning* as well which are narrowly connected and that it is possible to identify *three levels* on which strangeness is constructed by social subjects.

We have to remind of two things: the stranger is a stranger only in a foreign land, not at home; and: something can look strange to me, but not to you. This shows us that "strange" is a *relative* concept like "left" or "right" and that there is no substantial quality like "strangeness". To call something or someone "strange" is a *judgement* someone makes and "strangeness" or even "the stranger" is a *construction* of the speaking person, is *related* to her/ him. I now propose to distinguish *three levels* on which this construction takes place: a *cognitive* level, an *emotional* level and a *normative* level. To identify them we first have to list the *five aspects* of "strange":

1. *foreign* denotes an aspect of locality (another place)
2. *strange* denotes an epistemological aspect (other features)
3. *alien* - first denotes a juridic aspect (someone other's belongings),
4. - secondly denotes the social aspect of membership (belonging to a group)
5. *strange* also denotes the psychological aspect of unfamiliarity.

We may combine the first three aspects as denotations of *alterity (otherness)* which marks the *cognitive* level. Important here is the relation between the own and the other. On the *normative* level it is the relation between intimacy and social *distance*, and on the *emotional* level the relation between the familiar and the *unfamiliar*. *Otherness, unfamiliarity* and *social distance* make up the construction of the stranger. Whenever a person encounters alterity and unfamiliarity she/ he has to make a decision on how to interact with it on the normative level. It is the decision whether to see and to treat the unfamiliar other as *other* or as *stranger*. One reason why Georg Simmel could not see this in his seminal text on the stranger is that he only described *one out of many* types of strangers (Simmels text [Simmel 1908] is often cited but mostly poorly understood, see Saalmann in press chapter 1, part 4a).

Tzvetan Todorov in his book "The Conquest of America" shed some light on this process in which the other is transformed into the stranger and his analysis conforms with mine and Baumann's
insofar as he distinguished the same *three* levels. He spoke of three "axis" the problem of alterity has: On the *axiological* level value judgements are necessary, on the *epistemological* level one has to decide whether to know or to be ignorant of the other's identity, and on the *praxeological* level one has to chose between actions of rapproachement or distancing (Todorov 1992: 185). All this is very insightful, but we still need an argument why people today should decide on other ways to deal with the unfamiliar other than the "conquistadores" did.

A plausible argument may be found in a book of the German Axel Honneth, a follower of Jürgen Habermas. In discussion of the early Hegel and the theories of George H. Mead he also comes to distinguish *three* relevant levels for the relationship to the other. Human beings long for positive reactions from others because these experiences are essential in the constant process of the (re)construction of a positive selfimage. We all long for *emotional* care, *cognitive* respect and *social* appreciation to develop selfconfidence, selfrespect and selfesteem. Everybody strives for recognition and acceptance, not only respect or tolerance alone. The correlates in the social sphere for this psychological needs are *love*, *law* and *solidarity* (see Honneth 1992: 148 – 211; 274 – 87).

The concept of the individual person that Honneth proposes here is the same as in modern psychological and social theories which show that personal identity is an *intersubjective* construction. Persons take form "in the flow of historically, socially, culturally and materially shaped lives. [...] Identities are lived in and through activity and so must be conceptualized as they develop in social practice. But identities [are as well] psychohistorical formations that develop over a person's lifetime, populating intimate terrain and motivating social life" (Holland/ Lachicotte/ Skinner/ Cain 1998: 5). Knowing this has consequences for the attitude towards the other. Insofar as the acknowledgement is of greater value, the greater the difference between people is, one should protect the *otherness* of the other and de-construct images of him as stranger, in order to see and understand his otherness. Love, law and solidarity not only are kinds of mutual acknowledgement but also work as protective forces which help to guarantee the freedom necessary for everyone to realize her/his individuality and autonomy. But this claim for autonomy means autonomy for all, because autonomous others are the precondition for a well developed personality and true own autonomy. We have to accept therefore that autonomy is limited. This means *Individualism without unlimited Liberalism*.

So in the end we reach a position between Liberalism and Communitarianism. Our focus here is on the "egocentric" interest everybody has in satisfactory social relations and on the reciprocity inherent in them. But in contrast to some universalistic argumentations (like that of Apel and Habermas) which are only interested in the *abstract* other, here with Honneth we are interested in the *concrete* other. Abstract solidarity is useless in real social life, only reflexive solidarity with the
concrete other may help in our post-postmodern world. The argument presented here for the possibility of solidarity resembles Utilitarianism in some kind. But it is necessary to see that the Utilitarians argue with two already existing entities (the individual and the community) whereas here is argued with the process in which the two interdependently come to be - the socialized individual and the social unit based on interactive solidarity. The reflexive solidarity is not based on communication or communicative action (alone) but on the whole way people lead their everyday life. It is in this aspect of the practice of everyday life that my position meets with the way Richard Rorty thinks on "communitarian" themes like solidarity and justice (Rorty 1991: 1997).

**Conclusion**

The main intention in this text has been twofold: First to show that there is the same division into three levels, concerning emotion, cognition and interaction norms, with respect to our orientation in social space (Baumann), the construction of the stranger (Saalmann), the way we deal with the other (Todorov) and our longing for recognition and a positive selfimage (Honneth), and secondly to show that this fact gives hope for the possibility of a reflexive solidarity between autonomous individuals, insofar as we do not construct the other as stranger. Everybody leads her/ his life constructing social space in which she/ he meets other persons. The way in which one constructs this social space is one of the factors that determine how one interacts with the others. The other factor lies in her/ his personality. She/ he must be willing to interact with or to understand the other. If there is no readiness to do that, the other is constructed as a stranger with whom it is difficult to feel solidarity. So solidarity is the more probable if we do not construct the other as a stranger or if we de-construct those constructions. As a "reward" we receive recognition and acceptance after which everybody strives. For this reason we may even feel solidarity with per-sons who are very different from us or our culture. Therefore solidarity in a society of “strangers“ seems possible.

**References**


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