

Antipode

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David Featherstone, *Solidarity: Hidden Histories and Geographies of Internationalism*, London: Zed Books, 2012. ISBN: 9781848135963 (cloth); ISBN: 9781848135956 (paper); ISBN: 9781780324128 (e-book)

For Featherstone, *Solidarity* is all about generating the similarities needed in order to ground one's commitment to another, or to a group. He adopts a critique of solidarities that are based purely on 'given' attributes such as class, nationality, ethnicity, *etc.*, as homogeneous. By definition these categories both include and exclude at the same time, and "trap our understandings of solidarity within a reductive binary of similarity and dissimilarity" (p. 23). Such false binaries are to be challenged as being ultimately (in the long-term, at a larger scale) more divisive than capable of fostering connections beyond similarity or difference. Yet, much of the empirical writings on another form of togetherness - 'community' - demonstrate that connections and belonging are far stronger in groups when grounded in something shared, be that a characteristic, experience, or values, alongside place, class, or ethnicity. Featherstone's insight is that such commonality, which is the basis of togetherness or solidarity, is not a 'given': it must be worked at, produced, and challenged. Featherstone specifically challenges the notion that for solidarity to occur "there needs to be a preexisting commonality for the solidarity to be durable or effective". Instead "practices of solidarity generate or negotiate such questions of difference through political action" (p. 23). Solidarity then emerges when working together on a common task; it can emerge across distance, and other 'surface' characteristics. When working together, solidarity is forged, not latent.

Featherstone uses Agamben to outline "an account of solidarity 'that in no way concerns essence' (Agamben 1993: 17-18)" (p. 37). While this appears to fit nicely in Featherstone's well-worked argument, Agamben's anti-essentialist book *The Coming Community* is perhaps more relevant to 'community' than solidarity. Sharing a common life or belonging to a body of people (community) is going deeper towards the core of the human condition (the aim of Agamben's collection of essays) than a unity of aims or objectives (solidarity). Hence much of *Solidarity* is

also relevant for other forms of togetherness, or thrown-togetherness (see Massey 2005): community, association, alliance, cooperatives, or anarcho-syndicalism.

Featherstone continues: “To understand the role of solidarity in shaping and transforming political relations it is necessary to assert the importance of place-based activity” (p. 30). The central importance of locally bound socialist projects is what Raymond Williams labeled ‘militant particularism’ - an idea later developed by David Harvey (1996) in *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference* and something Featherstone (1998) turned his attention to in an *Antipode* review of Harvey’s work. Place-based solidarity, like a campaign against a new coal-fired power station in your region, or NIMBY activism against the wind turbines needed to replace the old power station, can be romantic and reified, but can also be the crucial grounding in which to forge community and solidarity, both with those who happen to be locally proximate, and also those distant others networked through links and chains of materials connecting one place with others far away. Featherstone does not privilege local activist or socialist activities, yet is aware of the central importance of local action, albeit with have an eye to global process and flows. One doesn’t have to dig very deep to see the influence of Doreen Massey in these ideas; indeed, this is straight out of Massey’s notion of ‘place-beyond-place’.

Featherstone fleshes out this building of solidarity with many examples, including anti-fascist movements and organisations, building on innovative recent scholarship on C.L.R. James (see Whittall 2011), black internationalism, the Spanish civil war, anti-nuclear campaigns, the climate justice movement, and anti-globalisation protests that reached their high watermark in Seattle in 1999. Featherstone furthers his impressive historical geography credentials with solid documentation of how, where, and why solidarity was forged in these examples, usually across distance and scale.

Many chapters cover no new theoretical ground, but flesh out Featherstone’s already well made points with reams of empirical data. The key themes recur: solidarity can be forged from the ground up, in spite of official conditions being against such relations and associations; these solidarities are not ‘given’, but can be forged through political struggle and mobilisation. Featherstone is a gracious host to his reader, taking time out from marshaling the ever-accumulating historical and geographical evidence in this book to again and again show the linkages to the theory and themes that run throughout the accounts.

I found this book's two best chapters to also be the most problematic: those on counter-globalisation and the battle of Seattle, and on environmentalism and the Copenhagen/COP 15 talks. They again repeat and rest on Featherstone's argument that solidarity is forged from below. As Featherstone gets more up to date, he is more nuanced, mature and balanced with the data. Earlier chapters dealing with cases more distant from the present feel like they have a central, unified thrust of an argument running through them. The lack of a clear narrative with these two chapters is perhaps due to these events being so recent in memory. Or more likely it is because they are born of personal experience with such groups and activities. The more current chapters appear written with more than one imagined reader in mind. In the acknowledgements Featherstone, to his great credit, talks of being open to ideas and injustices he was previously less aware of, particularly gender issues. When writing of events and struggles still ongoing it is perhaps impossible to ignore the messy, multiple, and contested character of such movements. Only with hindsight can one more firmly state what an event or movement 'meant', or capture it as a whole; perhaps too these are events and struggles whose narratives are far less sedimented, and more sharply contested, than the stories from the recent and distant past that inhabit earlier chapters. Accepting that no story is ever fully settled, Featherstone makes careful room for the internal contestation within the solidarities that are formed. He pays particular attention to the reinforcing of dominant white culture in the battle of Seattle protests. Solidarity here so often comes together to oppose an injustice, simultaneously remaining blind to, and thus sustaining and enacting, yet more injustices. Some working class dockworkers on strike were often anti-black and racist, as were some Spanish civil war activists. Many of the progressive movements outlined here were also unknowingly sexist.

The book culminates in the present around pressing issues such as environmentalism and international social justice. Featherstone's analysis of prefigurative politics benefits from the solid sweep of historical geography in earlier chapters. The reader begins to get a sense of similar tactics and struggles across space and time - indeed the solidarity of these struggles, from C.L.R. James to David Graeber, anti-slavery to boycotting Coca-Cola. Much of the book recalls the familiar ways of expressing this solidarity through boycotts and campaigns. These seem to have stood the test of time, but are they universals or durable particulars? Do solidarities need to be expressed differently now? For instance, in 2012 activists called for boycotts in the UK of Amazon and Starbucks following blanket media coverage of their tax avoidance, and of Barclays

for its seeming inexhaustible capacity for scandal, their rigging of the LIBOR being the most recent and high profile. With no end of injustices solidarities can form around, it seems that public boycott campaigns can reach a saturation point. Can we simply avoid any and all tax avoiders as clearly as a 1980's anti-apartheid activist can say 'don't buy Cape apples'?

In a digital age forms of protests and solidarities are changing, as Mason (2012) has tentatively proposed. '38 Degrees' and similar campaigning websites indicate a willingness to take more action, but also a preference for actions that are short-term, winnable, 'Facebook like-able', and transitory. Most of the solidarities outlined here - such as the 'war of position' solidarity with Pinochet-putsched leftists fostered in Scotland - were time-consuming, slow burning, and gruelling. What now is the role for solidarity boycotts and campaigns? Further work on pushing these questions would be welcome.

There is also a looming question that remains unasked in Featherstone's book - what about the solidarities of those 'we' see as politically and ethically regressive? That is, could fascist organisations also form and enact such solidarities? Far-right political parties across Europe are forming links, and pursuing other such grassroots, bottom-up, initiatives to forge collective agency. Does Featherstone think, like Antonio Gramsci or Stuart Hall, that solidarity is never the purview merely of the left, that in fact it could be replicated for the right? This book does not discuss the potential misappropriation of its insights and perhaps it is unfair to ask it to do so.

Featherstone has much to offer the hard-pressed academic, scholar-activist, or public intellectual. Working-class internationalism was driven by "those who had much to gain in the short term" (p. 4) he states. But it was their willingness to commit to one another, rather than those gains, that ultimately forged solidarities across continents and oceans. It is this setting aside of individual, short-term gains, which is a condition of possibility for solidarity for Featherstone. In this, neoliberalism with its individualising forces, alongside its focus on the short-term, the transitory, and fleeting possible gains, would seem to offer less fertile ground for fostering these political solidarities. But, "internationalism was driven not only by key theorists or political figures" (p. 4). Featherstone shows here that those who make such solidarities were not *only* academics reading (or writing), or top-down political figures (however left-leaning). Here is perhaps the book's greatest virtue. As clear and lucid of an explanation of political solidarities the book may be, it recognizes that it is who adopts these positions, who enacts them and

collaborates with others without sharing myopic or individual interests and concerns, who have much to gain in the long-term, together.

In a sense the key solidarity Featherstone believes in, in this book, is that between academic and activist. This is a work that intends to provoke similar solidarities today. It furthers understanding of solidarity, but it is also written conscious of the lessons to be learnt from previous struggles, ready to dig the trenches, in the right places, today. With the choice of publisher, this is a more reasonably priced and accessible paperback, compared to other purely academic publishers. With Featherstone's lucid writing, weaving captivating stories of the past, this is a work that deserves to be widely read - particularly read beyond the academy. Featherstone's book is not necessary or even sufficient for spawning solidarities, but it is an academic intervention that helps understand and work towards them.

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