

KERRI WOODS AND  
JOSHUA HOBBS

## INTRODUCTION

The language of solidarity is currently everywhere. Turning on the news or checking social media, we are called to solidarity with a seemingly endless list of groups and individuals, by everyone from activist organisations to multinational corporations, by BLM and the President of Ukraine. Everyone, from social media influencers to the President of the United States, is in on the act, declaring their solidarity with the struggles of various groups or individuals facing injustice, or with the whole of humanity or even the biosphere.

This turn to solidarity, or at least to the rhetoric of solidarity, is one that many of us will welcome, and perhaps reflects a renewed interest in activism, or perhaps (more cynically) in pressing claims in the language of activism. Yet, this proliferation of demands for and expressions of solidarity raises significant questions for those interested in philosophical analysis. Can these people all be talking about the same thing, are all of these calls for solidarity conceptually plausible, and what do they require of the would be solidarist? Is embracing solidarity a requirement of justice, what is the relation between solidarity and justice? What kind of normative relation is solidarity itself in a globalised and fragmented world, and what does it mean to speak of global solidarity? Can meaningful solidarity exist across steep power differentials, across difference and distance (spatial and otherwise)?

There is, of course, a long history of theorising solidarity, albeit, solidarity has always been something of a niche topic in political philosophy, sitting between and alongside analyses of the nature and demands of justice, the possibilities of social and political cohesion, and the potential and limits of local and global community, all topics that have commanded much more sustained philosophical attention. Yet, contemporary political theory and philosophy has not been silent on these issues. There has been some important recent work theorising solidarity as a moral and political relation (including by some contributors to this volume) (Duford, 2022; Kolers, 2016; Sangiovanni, 2015; Scholz, 2008; Shelby, 2007). Similarly, there has been some renewed interest in highlighting the dangers or

even the conceptual implausibility of some of these broader solidaristic claims. Feminist scholars and scholars of neo-imperialism and decolonialism have been particularly sensitive to the problems of imbalances of power and the normative implications of speaking for others in appeals to solidarity that transcend class, nationality, gender and other forms of difference (Mohanty, 1988; Narayan, 2004; Khader, 2019). Critics of cosmopolitan thought have also been deeply sceptical about the possibility of deep or meaningful solidarity across cultures and indeed generations.

Nevertheless, solidarity remains somewhat under-theorised in contemporary debates about global justice; it has often been both supported and dismissed without close interrogation of what historically, conceptually, and normatively solidarity means. Solidarity has different resonances and different lineages in traditions of thought spanning Marxist and critical theory, feminist theory, and critical race theory, and other fields, which do not always engage one another. Nor are these diverse conceptualisations of solidarity much explored in debates about the absence or potential of solidarity in relation to global challenges, or in response to pressing practical dilemmas facing activists and other political actors who attempt to create, further or negotiate solidarity relations. This relative neglect of the study of solidarity itself is surprising given that activists and scholars alike speak consistently in terms of solidarity and attribute motivational power to it. This special issue brings together theorists working on the topic of solidarity from a diversity of traditions in order to begin answering some of these questions and to fill this neglected theoretical space.

The issue begins with papers that take up contrasting aspects of the question of what solidarity means in practice, drawing on activist's experiences of attempting to construct solidarity relations. The transnational protests that occurred in the aftermath of the George Floyd killing in the United States is the subject of Antoine Louette's paper. The paper examines what lessons can be drawn from these protests as a means to construct transnational racial solidarity. Sally Scholz's paper develops a normative account of intergenerational political solidarity and what this means with regard to the pursuit of global justice. The third paper in the volume, authored by Kerri Woods & Josh Hobbs, also considers an activist dilemma of solidarity, what deference to the lived experience of those we wish to stand in solidarity with requires in practice, but broadens out the question to consider what this means for would-be solidarists beyond the committed activist. Yael Peled's paper tackles another pressing practical dilemma, the language in which solidarity is developed and negotiated, arguing that conceptions of solidary relations have neglected language and the ethics of linguistic practices. The issue then concludes with an article theorising

solidarity at a more general level, interrogating the roots and the possibilities of the concept. Avery Kolers' contribution examines the historical roots of the concept with the French Solidarists, and whether a renewed Solidarism can respond to demands for environmental justice, and the struggle against environmental racism. Together, these articles shed new light on a political concept, practice, phenomena – solidarity – that has a long history but which has a renewed significance for our present politics, and which we therefore have strong motivations to interrogate and to better understand.

---

*Kerri Woods*  
*Associate Professor of Political Theory*  
*University of Leeds*  
*Email: K.Woods@Leeds.ac.uk*

*Joshua Hobbs*  
*Lecturer and Consultant in Applied Ethics*  
*University of Leeds*  
*Email: J.J.Hobbs@Leeds.ac.uk*



## **References**

Duford R (2022) *Solidarity in Conflict: A Democratic Theory*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Mohanty C (1988) Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses. *Feminist Review*: 333–358.

Narayan U (2004) The Project of Feminist Epistemology: Perspectives from a Nonwestern Feminist. *Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies*, ed. S. Harding, New York, NY: Routledge.

Sangiovanni A (2015) Solidarity as Joint Action. *Journal of Applied Philosophy*. 32/4: 340-359.

Scholz S (2008) *Political Solidarity*. Penn State University Press.

Shelby T (2007) *We Who Are Dark: The Philosophical Foundations of Black Solidarity*. Boston, MA: Harvard University Press.