

COMMENTARY

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# The Question of Solidarity and Society: Comment on Will Kymlicka's article: "Solidarity in Diverse Societies"

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Until the fall of 2015 although the toll of migrants who drowned daring to cross the Mediterranean appeared in headlines, most of those who survived the crossing were kept in their hundreds of thousands from much of Europe. Then those dispossessed by war or by the neoliberal agendas inflicted on their countries began walking into Europe with the goal of settling in the wealthiest states, which were also those countries—along with the United States—that have been manufacturing the instruments of war, participating in various “coalitions of the willing” and benefiting from contemporary forms of accumulation through dispossession. In demanding the right to settle and rebuild their lives, migrants challenged the political narratives that excluded them from belonging to Europe and claiming the wealth and social benefits concentrated in a handful of European states. And as migrants began to enter Europe in large numbers and make these claims, a large number of Europeans began to welcome these migrants (Kermani, 2015; Mount, 2015). Through a host of convivial practices these Europeans demonstrated that they repudiated the dominant anti-refugee discourse and policies of their political leaders and identified with the refugees. At railroad stations from Budapest to Munich, along roads, in temporary shelters, and through demonstrations, those who extended welcomes repeatedly stated that they saw migrants and non-migrants as bound together by their common humanity<sup>1</sup>.

To note this embrace is not to deny that recently and increasingly, there has been a rise of racism and a repudiation of cultural and religious diversity across Europe, North America, and around the world. Both political tendencies require explanation. Will Kymlicka's essay serves as a useful entry point into these contemporary crosscurrents by raising the question of how scholars, activists, and policy makers can understand as well as speak to our times. Currently, we find ourselves challenged by a persisting contradiction: even as the world is ever more tightly and unequally woven together through economic, political, military, and cultural networks of unequal power, increasing numbers of intellectuals as well as political leaders are embracing nation-state building narratives that portray the world as a set of independent states with their own discrete economies and welfare regimes. Unfortunately, Kymlicka has joined the ranks of those who perpetuate the Westphalian fantasy of a world of separate and politically equal nation-states and embrace nationalism as a progressive force at this moment of history.

In this response to Kymlicka, I argue that his essay lacks sufficient historical reflexivity to assess the changing conjunctures that continuously restructure the conditions for struggle over wealth redistribution and social welfare. Writing about western social theory and historical reflexivity, Gertrud Lenzer (1975, p. xxiii) noted that many past and more recent social theorists have understood “how virtually impossible it is to separate oneself out from the thoughts and realities of one’s historical era, but also how imperative critical activity” is for social theory as a political project, that is to say an analysis of social life that reflects on relations of power (See for example, Mill, 1833; Gouldner, 1970; Said, 1978). The irony of the contemporary moment is that historical reflexivity has become curiously lost in recent writings about migration, integration, and social cohesion despite the emergence of a generation of authors steeped in the deconstructionism of variants of post-modern theory that question any uncritical stance towards hegemonic “truths”.

Yet, a reflexive conjunctural approach to history and social theory is necessary in order to acknowledge the inextricable links between past nation-state building in Europe and North America, massive violent extractions of wealth from racialized imperial subjects, uprisings in colonial centers and among the colonized, fierce globe-spanning struggles for social justice and the past emergence of democratic reforms and welfare states. This perspective is also necessary to clarify the current relationships between capital accumulation through revitalized forms of accumulation by dispossession and the diminishing, dismantling and privatization of social welfare regimes.

I also take issue with Kymlicka’s advocacy of nationalism as necessary for the preservation of welfare regimes. In both past and current conjuncture nationalism has served to obscure the sources of national wealth by fostering concepts of national racialized superiority and entitlement among the citizens of the imperial centers. Throughout my response to Kymlicka, I emphasize the harm done by social theorists who unquestioningly conflate the concepts of nation-state and society. Although Kymlicka gives a token bow to the “sin of methodological nationalism”, he does not adequately address the theoretical underpinnings of the critique (Beck, 2002; Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002). Instead, despite his initial statements about the “contingency of perceptions of commonality and otherness,” Kymlicka’s defense of nationalism leads him down the slippery slope of communitarian logic. Even as he admits that a national ‘we’ and a foreign ‘they’ are constructed sentiments, he welcomes these constructions in light of the “progressive” potential of “nationhood” and “a national feeling of belonging.”

For Kymlicka “social justice ... arguably depends on bounded solidarities. Nationhood has helped to secure such an ethic of membership.” Although, unlike anti-immigrant “nativists,” Kymlicka recognizes that those who are not “native born” may become part of the national community, he assumes that to speak of solidarity is to maintain a binary logic that defines those who are not members of the national community as “strangers.” to whom we respond with a different dimension of affect, that of “humanitarianism”. Whether we offer rescue or tolerance, in Kymlicka’s words all forms of “justice to strangers is humanitarian” rather than solidaristic.

In invoking this reading of social theory, Kymlicka joins those social theorists (Derrida, 1984, Levinas, 1998) who are responding to the current conjuncture by reviving older concepts of alterity that envision the stranger as a challenge to the communal constitution

of society. In concluding my critique I suggest other ways of thinking about society. I offer a reformulated approach to cosmopolitan sociabilities that makes visible the everyday social relations and social movements built on domains of partial but potent human commonalities.

### **Conjunctural analysis: recovering a reflexive view of social order**

I suggest that a conjunctural reading of social theory is needed to adequately scrutinize key concepts such as society whose meanings are today taken to be unchanging. Clarke (2014) reminds us that conjunctural analysis is not a theory but rather an orientation. To make a conjunctural analysis is to assess “the forces, tendencies, forms of power, and relations of domination,” which at any moment in history can lead to regional and local political, economic and social arrangements that differ from each other yet are interdependent (Clarke, 2014, p. 115). Rather than examine the concepts of society and community as unchanging and unrelated to relations of power, an analysis of each conjuncture denaturalizes views of social order and challenges the hegemonic, common sense of a particular point in time.

Contrary to Kymlicka’s assumptions of the necessary linkage between nation-state and society, social logics have changed in different conjunctures. In Western social theory, the meanings and degree of overlap of nation-state, society, community, the social order, and solidarity have varied in different historical moments and a binary between national society and the stranger has not been a constant. From the beginning of modern European social theory until World War I, the concept of society was a floating signifier. However at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as nation-state building became the project of capitalist classes, there was increasing support in social theory for approaching nation-states as societies. For example, Auguste Comte, often seen as a foundational western social theorist, offered an ill-defined concept of society that reflected the transnational, colonial conjuncture in which he lived, and the specificities of the aftermath of the French and Haitian revolutions and the rise of industrial capitalism. He spoke of “society” hurrying “towards a profound moral and political anarchy” (Lenzer, 1975, p. 9) but society was certainly not a specific state or nation but was projected in Comte’s words on “the whole of the human species and chiefly the whole of the white race” (Lenzer, 1975, p. 27). His approach to social order was shaped by European debates about variations in mankind, the limits of humanity and the boundaries of the civilized world.

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, political leaders as well as social theorists responded to the need to build popular support and national unity in the face of increased rivalry between imperial powers and growing transnational movements for the empowerment of workers, women, and colonials. They invested some of the fruits of empire in a territorial project of building national community, which they materialized through infrastructures –schools, roads, railroads, and postal services. Theories of society once again reflected and contributed to the conjunctural change. Durkheim, (1893/1933) and Tönnies, (1887/1957) described human society as originating in a primordial organic community in which the primary social boundary was between members and strangers, that is, between self and the other. Writing in the 1890s, Herbert Spencer defined “society as a plurality of people occupying a specific territory and between whom various common features obtain” (Martindale, 1960, p. 71).

### Conditions that underlie welfare state distributions

Careful scrutiny of the communitarian just-so-story in relationship to the complexity of the ethnographic record reveals evidence of social groupings with a multiplicity of identities and fluid boundaries before they formed states or experienced conquest (Beidelman, 1999; Fried, 1975; Keesing, 1987). However, blithely invoking Marshall's "community membership" and the Swedish concept of a classless *folkhemmet*, Kymlicka projects nationalism as the modern form of a primordial communitarianism. Nationalism differs from humanitarianism responses to strangers "that do not depend on any sense of nationally-bounded solidarity." This is because nationalism is rooted in the "ethic of social membership [which produces] ...the mutual concern and obligation we have a members of a shared society." As such, he believes nationalism was significant in the emergence of past welfare regimes, although he acknowledges that some social historians argue that "welfare states" arose out of political contestation between different class forces. Kymlicka asserts that nationhood can help save the welfare state by facilitating "the sort of solidarity required for a redistributive welfare state." Moreover, he considers "liberal democracy" as a productive component of the mix of elements upon which redistributive policies depends.

Many social analysts have argued that initially "social insurance became a modern extension of more traditional roles played by the state" as part of "the elites' anticipatory response" to "a fear of workers' growing power" (Baldwin, 1992, p. 39). Their work challenges Kymlicka's conclusion that the welfare state was the result of European socialist parties turning from "class solidarity to national solidarity." In this brief commentary I can't fully rebut his version of the emergence social welfare policies, which should encompass also the Americas and the post-colonial states of the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia. I simply note several key points that need to be considered in discussing the conjunctural conditions that underlie the institution of welfare state redistributions and their demise. Importantly for the arguments I am making here, in Europe and North America not only were enfranchisement and/or redistributive social welfare policies an outcome of massive struggles against ruling elites but they were the outcome of transnational social movements for social justice and not nationally contained or oriented struggles.

The global historical conjuncture of 1870–1914 was a period in which ruling elites responded to the social effects of massive industrialization, urbanization, and internal and international migration with a mix of violent repression of urban workers and colonial subjects coupled in colonial centers with universal male political enfranchisement and social benefits. Generally democratic measures for male citizens preceded any form of social insurance and protection, although occasionally, as in the German Empire, Sweden and Norway, social movements yielded both (Bédarida 1990; Kettunen & Petersen, 2011).

In light of Kymlicka's linkage of the welfare state, democracy, citizenship, and nationalism, it is helpful to recall that it was autocratic German government under Bismarck that initiated the welfare state. The regime supported the institutionalization of a set of social insurance provisions that provided disability, accident, health, and old age benefits to all workers who were legal residents of Germany; citizenship was not a prerequisite for social benefits. Social benefits were offered amidst an intertwining trajectory of international socialists and labor movements demanding empowerment and an industrially powerful German economy within which migrant workers played an important role. These measures sought to "reconcile the working classes to the

authority of the state” and stave off broader socialist demands (Williamson, 2011, p. 86). Although anti-immigrant nationalist forces played a growing political role in Germany during the period in which the German social welfare regime was instituted, this exclusionary nationalism did not represent the workers movements or the majority of the parliament of the German Empire at the time, who in 1886 condemned the massive deportation of immigrant workers of that period. The workers’ movements in Germany, in which both those of German and migrant backgrounds participated, were part of the fierce transnationally organized struggles for political and economic power and social justice waged at that time in many locations in the world (Featherstone, 2012; Kettunen & Petersen, 2011; Augustin & Jørgensen, 2016).

In the multiple intersecting trajectories of power and contestation that made up the conjuncture that followed, one that was marked by world wars and depression (1914–1945), more states, including the United States, did provide social welfare. However, there is considerable evidence that while public policy moved from regimes of public charity to public benefits, the element of governance and regulation of the poor rather than their embrace within national community was deeply embedded in social welfare regimes (Piven & Cloward, 1993; Soss, Fording, & Schram, 2011). In understanding the conditions in which formal democracy and welfare state policies were instituted it is essential to keep in mind that there were massive influxes of wealth to a core of European states and the United States not only from industrialization but also from continuing or new direct and indirect forms of colonization.

If we deploy a global conjunctural analysis rather than Kymlicka’s penchant for national narratives then it becomes clear that the states celebrated by Kymlicka for their redistributive welfare regimes and democratic processes were built upon the extraction of wealth from subjected and ethno-religiously/racially differentiated populations. In different historical moments different means of extraction have been central ranging from the intensive accumulation of surplus value within the labor process to varying modes of accumulation by dispossession. Moreover, it was only in the years between 1945 and 1990, the pocket of time of the Cold War in which competing western and eastern blocks both made claims to champion social justice, that full blown social welfare states flourished in western Europe and the US expanded its offering of social benefits,

### **Thinking about the current conjuncture**

If Kymlicka’s reading of the contributions of past social movements to the emergence of welfare regimes is questionable, his claims that liberal nationalism can safeguard the future of redistributive welfare programs are equally dubious. There is no doubt that politicians have sought to rally increasingly dispossessed citizens behind national flags in the name of protecting the welfare state from being “overrun” by “foreigners.” However, although at different rates in different countries, since the institution of neoliberal restructuring measures in the 1970s, social benefits and services have been weakened, reduced or replaced by privatization initiatives that make them instruments of massive private capital accumulation rather than redistribution.

In the last few years, scholars in a number of fields have emphasized that to understand the demise of redistributive welfare programs, we need to look at the contemporary

restructuring of global modes of capital accumulation that underlie the variously configured neoliberal agendas of states and international financial institutions (Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Ong, 2007; Harvey, 2004, 2005, 2006; Wacquant, 2012). The deindustrialization of many nation-states in the west was accompanied by reorganized forms of accumulation including the elimination or avoidance of redistributive taxes, the deregulation of banking, and financial industries including debt collection and renewed prominence of accumulation by various forms of dispossession. Contemporary forms of accumulation by dispossession that underlie so called neoliberal “reforms” take the form of seizing public goods –often spoken of as the commons– for private profit. These include public housing, water supplies, hospitals, schools, and welfare services.

Accumulation by dispossession is accompanied by a wide range of physical and social displacements such as migration, unemployment, downward social mobility, and homelessness. Processes of dispossession are maintained ultimately by force but those displaced are simultaneously dehumanized by narratives of national, racialized, ethno-religious difference (Butler & Athanasiou, 2013). The targeting of migrants fleeing war, structural adjustment, and gang related violence as the causes of the demise of the welfare states is just one example of these narratives of the ‘ungrievable’ other (Butler, 2010; see also De Genova, in press). The criminalization of the dispossessed unemployed ‘native born’ who have no place in the post-industrial economies is another. In response, our political economy of the contemporary conjuncture must include a critique of the cultural processes that by naturalizing national, cultural, religious as well as class differences obscure the continuing extraction of wealth from the dispossessed around the world, an extractive process that is restrained by neither borders nor claims to being citizens “by birth.”

Moreover, if the intensified processes of accumulation with their concomitant displacements of people are the transformations that mark the contemporary conjuncture, then we must address when, how, and where people who find themselves displaced by these processes are coming into political motion. There is no doubt that some people in Europe, the US, the Middle East and elsewhere are reacting to the processes of dispossession with a politics of hate, anger, and vengeance. However, too little has been said about the more hopeful side of the current moment, expressed through solidarities with refugees entering Europe, Canada, and a range of US cities.<sup>2</sup> To theorize the politics of solidarity, it is useful to look more closely at the nature and significance of cosmopolitan sociability (Glick Schiller, Darieva, & Gruner-Domic, 2011; Glick Schiller, 2015;).

### **Cosmopolitan sociabilities: solidarities without borders**

Descriptions of everyday convivialities (Bayat, 2008; Gilroy, 2004, Frykman, 2016, Schmidt, 2016) challenges Kymlicka’s assumptions that the solidarities that could connect refugees and people of non-migrant backgrounds would only be possible in a world reorganized by “post-national cosmopolitan, agonistic, or ecological theories of democracy and citizenship.” Even in thinking about migrant citizens, Kymlicka retains an “ethnic lens” (Glick Schiller, Çağlar, & Guldbrandsen, 2006) that categories the social relations between people of migrant and non-migrant background as “multiculturalism.” This prevents him from observing the everyday sociabilities not based on tolerance of difference but on recognition of commonalities.

In the past fifteen years in cities in Northern England, northern New England, USA, and eastern Germany (Glick Schiller & Çağlar, 2011; Glick Schiller, 2015; Glick Schiller & Çağlar, 2016) I have lived and observed the everyday sociabilities that connect people categorized as natives and those seen as migrants. Those categorized as migrants included legal immigrants, those without residency documents, refugees, and asylum seekers. Repeatedly newcomers built social relations with natives on the bases of shared interests, emotions, and aspirations within a range of settings including residence in the same building on the same street, their workplace, a shared religious congregation, or institutional spaces such as a public libraries or community centers. “Whatever their differences, people were brought together by common domains of affect (Turner, 1987), mutual respect and shared aspirations” (Glick Schiller & Çağlar, 2016, p. 18). To find a way to speak about the mutualities that underlie such sociabilities, Ayse Çağlar and I use the term ‘domains of commonality’ (See also Glick Schiller et al, 2011). We build on Simmel (1949 [1910], p. 257) who noted that sociability consists of relations in which “one ‘acts’ as though all were equal, as though he esteemed everyone”, exactly because these interactions are not about difference. We noted that the participants in the social relations we observe frequently turn casual informal meetings into ongoing affective relationships that link them to each other. Such interactions can be fleeting or persist and develop over time (Lofland, 1973). Our respondents used the term ‘human’ to refer to the domains of commonality that emerged from some of their interactions. Stepping away from the predominant understanding of the term cosmopolitanism that frames it as an openness or tolerance of difference, I term those sociabilities formed on common aspirations of social justice, “cosmopolitan sociabilities” (Glick Schiller et al., 2011; Glick Schiller, 2015; Glick Schiller & Irving, 2015). Cosmopolitan sociabilities built not on tolerance of the other but on domains of commonality.

“may prove key building blocks of the social movements that challenge the growing class disparities that increasingly mark [the contemporary conjuncture]”. These sociabilities might be key to understanding how people are able to form fluid constellations of urban social movements to claim economic and social justice)...It is perhaps from the sociabilities, established by people who, despite their differences, construct domains of being human together, that the performed precarity of dispossession is transformed into struggles against the growing disparities and displacements of global capitalism “(Glick Schiller & Çağlar, 2016, pp. 30–31).

An understanding of cosmopolitan sociability and its relationship to accumulation by dispossession highlights that the welcome that Europeans gave to refugees in the fall of 2015 was not an expression of tolerance to strangers but an acknowledgement that we are all facing the consequences of global warring, and the depredations and displacements of capital accumulation; in that sense we are all refugees.’

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>This summary is based on reports from colleagues in Hungary, Austria, Germany, and France in September and October 2015. Reporting on the welcome of refugees in

Budapest, Zoltán Grossman (2015) noted that “this pro-refugee solidarity has gone largely unreported in the western media, which focuses entirely on the intransigence of the Hungarian government”.

<sup>2</sup>Much of information about the welcome extended in cities and towns in Europe, Canada, and the United States is found in press reports rather than academic writing. See for example Murphy, 2015 and Scott, 2015; Perhaps this is because most research funding supports the study of difference rather than commonality.

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