
Review

Solidarity in conflict: A democratic theory

Rochelle DuFord,
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Stop me if you have heard this one before. You join a political group to address systemic problems. Your spark for the group is there in the beginning as attendance and interest grows and some successes are marked. After a while, your interest dies down as conflicts arise about what the group should be about feel all too familiar, or if strategic choices be made to further aims, or, due to a dislike of some of the members you stop going all together. The work of solidarity is hard and tiring.

Such reasons for strife, the process of determining norms, who the group should be in solidarity with, and the consideration of instrumental means, are the ‘substantive conflicts’ that every group must grapple with in (p. 7). These issues are the focus of Rochelle DuFord’s *Solidarity in Conflict: A Democratic Theory*. Clear and enjoyable to read, DuFord’s book works through the steps and arguments about the purpose of solidarity in democratic theory and its place in the present moment. Starting with the premise that solidarity is a form of democracy that produces practices of ‘nonexclusion’, DuFord shows how solidarity is most generative when it can work through conflicts for social demands. The lens of the solidary group is used to understand current antidemocratic, authoritarian groups that seek to end conflict by imposing logics of domination and how solidarity is grounded as a non-ideal form of politics willing to engage in the continual process of world building and sustaining nonexclusion. *Solidarity in Conflict* is a meaningful contribution in agonistic theories of democracy, how to think about the goals of solidary groups, and why the present prominence of authoritarianism should further attempts at building a nonexclusive vision of politics.

For DuFord, democracy does not sit stagnant, waiting for others to act; rather, democracy serves as a tool for linked fate, value creation, or, in its worst iterations, domination (p. 23). ‘Politics is something we do’; even if the ideal remains forever remains out of reach, democratic life is available now in the process of building solidarity (p. 162). This approach follows agonistic theorists of democracy who argue for the generative possibilities of working through disagreements, taking on



the work of constructing a set of mutual values, and the people's responsibility of maintaining political life. Preferring *virtù* over virtue, this theory of democracy follows with what Bonnie Honig (1993, pp. 66–67) notes is the promise of democratic life, the ability to make ourselves the subjects who can set our own values, principles, and goals. In diagnosing the neoliberal era as being unable to engage in this process of developing shared values, *Solidarity in Conflict* presents an exciting alternative to the contactless and static forms of social uniformity demanded by market logics (p. 29).

One of DuFord's interesting interventions comes in their reading of Jürgen Habermas's communicative reason as a way for renewing solidarity. This idea has been critiqued for ignoring discourses of race, gender, or queer discrimination and for failing to recognize actual conflicts in civil society (Flyvbjerg, 1998, pp. 216–217). In contrast, DuFord presents him as a thinker of the process of democratic life to resolve the conflicts of society (p. 162). The principle of determining who should be included, and the process of working through nonexclusion, means that conflicts must be generative of a more open, ideal form of solidary communication. If the ideal is to have a distinct, yet porous notion of solidarity, then the process of building nonexclusion demands a process that does not fall back on gatekeeping inclusion, but an active and robust sense of social life that looks out for one another and invites the challenge of building an ideal speech state with new groups to determine the *virtù* of democratic life.

DuFord's argument for substantive conflict and nonexclusion leads to two conclusions. First, the solidary group, acting against utilitarian and strategic judgments, inhibits an active form of social life that invites a focus of crafting ongoing nonexclusive norms as the goal of democracy. Recurring activist groups, such as the Combahee River Collective, which serve as reference points for the book, offer interesting historical cases that model nonexclusion as a democratic social practice to withstand both internal and external conflicts and violence (pp. 37–41). Even as these groups were unsuccessful in ending oppression, their solidarity continues to exist as an example to address existing antidemocratic and oppressive practices; allowing future political actors to address and make political what already causes strife.

Second, DuFord argues for the necessity of working through real conflicts in a solidary group to end mutual forms of oppression. However, the purpose of conflict as a process and not a goal in-itself comes into focus when critiquing 'left-Schmittian' theories for what motivates political life (p. 139) since 'it isn't that we need solidarity to have democracy, but that solidarity is a form of doing democracy' (p. 159). While groups engaging in 'substantive conflict' contest a political terrain that left-Schmittians accurately depict as liberalism masking real conflicts, this does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that conflict is necessary to political life. While conflict may be useful in maintaining a social element to democracy, DuFord notes that solidarity can lead to a different politics beyond



finding value through group competition (p. 170). This process is especially important in confronting a depoliticization of social life and reviving the type of social ontology that is deeply concerned with the interplay and generative aspects of group demands, individuals, and community in material circumstances.

An important, practical question remains in discussing solidarity and politics: can strategic questions factor into solidary considerations? For political actors and organizers, this view of solidarity points to a way to stay with the trouble of solidarity in a moment when it seems out of reach. The temptation itching at the back of some leftists' minds is that maybe if they stop talking about trans-rights, or make strategic choices about when to speak up about a radical vision for the future, they can win power and enact policies for a different world. This mirrors the approach of political moderates who seek to triangulate policies to appeal to just the right number of voters or, as some on the left have argued that we just need better cultural memes, principles of solidarity be damned, since the left will become better Gramscians (a byword for tapping into and forming popular hegemonic ideas) in the culture wars (Nagel, 2017, p. 44). If we build these compromised unsocial solidarities, DuFord argues, they will not save us from our political moment or more importantly, their practices will not lead to an alternative democratic life. We will win the battle, but at a great cost: institutions will continue to fail to address systemic and existential problems, from mass incarceration to anthropogenic climate emergencies (pp. 71–73).

Yet, there is a practical component when speaking of solidarity that cannot be ignored. I would argue that DuFord's nonexclusive solidarity should also appear as an attractive strategic choice, given that classes and identities become more flexible and global. Solidarity in such an active and nonexclusive form *is* a strategic choice if a movement or people want to form better organizing tactics. This is not DuFord's point in discussing what solidarity and the conditions of democracy are (they remain very clear about the problems strategic concerns bring about), yet it stands out as an incredibly useful reason for their vision of democracy when organizing politically. One can read *Solidarity in Conflict* as not only outlining a democratic theory but, exceptionally, a potential pathway to a more expansive democratic life beyond the solidary group. If good political theory is a problem in search of a method, and not the other way around, then DuFord strongly understands our political moment as one of fragmentation, conflict, an inability to conjure democracy to handle pressing political problems, and they have constructed a democratic subject and a set of principles that could reasonably address them.

In the closing of the book, DuFord writes quite beautifully about the negative utopic vision that undergirds this project. The ability to point to alternative practices of democratic life offers a counterweight to social totalization and various depoliticizations, taking on the importance of the present moment with a deep seriousness. If democratic practices are always up in the air and being worked on,



the realization of the democratic project may seem forever out of reach. *Solidarity in Conflict* reminds theorists and political actors that the fact that there will never be a ‘concrete utopia’ should only further the appeal of solidarity as a form of democracy, to both overcome what prevents us from reaching a democratic world and to create a democratic life in the present (p. 162).

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