Anthropological Theory

The promise of solidarity

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Solidarity, one might say, emerges through empathizing with the fate of others. Thereby, empathy is the rather affectively intuited than deliberately chosen response to an ethical obligation imposed upon us by a known or unknown Other. I thus regard empathy as a fundamental precondition for finding common ground with other people. But how do solidarity-based subjectivities evolve over the course of time? And what is it that makes solidarity last? These are the two questions that guide me through this contribution about the concept of solidarity. I argue that the formation and especially the maintenance of solidarity relationships require not only empathy but also, and most importantly, a commitment to other people or a cause. This commitment is constituted by a promise, which functions as the moral backbone of lasting political engagements. In order to maintain solidarity and thus to assume responsibility for global injustices, the binding character of this promise becomes central. In other words, taking on responsibility for others is a political act that includes the decision and the promise to continue to do so. In this sense solidarity becomes a contractual relationship. Julia Eckert (2020) writes that the 'transformative force of solidarity' not only grounds in the struggle against injustices but 'in its imaginative power to invent new institutions of care and support and thereby make the world otherwise'. I believe that this imaginative power lies in the empathetic capacity to see the world from another's point of view as well as in the binding character of the promise. Empathy is as a powerful counterpart to a culture of non-participation and apathy. Empirically speaking, however, relationships are always negotiated, and the concept of empathy does not account for conflicts that inevitably emerge in human encounters. In the struggle for solidaristic relationships across social, cultural and linguistic boundaries, it is necessary to acknowledge the disharmonies resulting from misunderstandings, disagreements and diverging points of view.

I came to understand the central importance of the promise during research on the human consequences of the European border regime. During fieldwork in southern Spain, I met two teachers, Violeta and Rafael, who had witnessed a boat sinking close to their hometown Rota. Their story illustrates how long-term solidarity depends on a move from an affective response to a contractual commitment.

In 2003, a dinghy carrying more than fifty Moroccan migrants overturned two hundred meters from the shore resulting in the death of 53 people, most of them young men from the Middle Atlas in central Morocco. When the teachers heard about the shipwreck, they rushed to the beach, prepared to help. Yet they found no one alive there. Hour after hour and day after day the ocean gave up bodies, washing them up on the shore. Violeta and Rafael, as well as many other people from Rota experienced intimately the intrusion of the dead bodies in their neighborhood. The sudden presence of death turned them into involuntary witnesses of the brutality of EU migration policies. They experienced this tragic event as an ethical demand that forced them to respond in a way that somehow seemed meaningful to them, and thus, ten days after the boat sinking, they travelled to the Middle Atlas to search for the bereaved families.

When they arrived in the tiny village Hansala where people lost twelve young men to the shipwreck, they 'encountered an entire village in mourning'. Ali, my host when I visited Hansala for the first time in 2015, told

me that Violeta and Rafael's unexpected arrival caused confusion in the village. Nobody engaged with the Spaniards because the villagers feared that they would blame them for the deaths of the young men. Violeta and Rafael felt responsible to do something and wanted to meet the families, yet people from Hansala turned away and ignored the Spaniards completely. Puzzled by this unexpected response to their visit, the Spaniards left. But they came back two months later and this time the villagers, utterly surprised by the Spaniards' return, did not turn away. This second encounter was a turning point in the emerging relationship. The fact that the Spaniards had made the strenuous journey to the tiny village in the mountains a second time showed the Moroccans that the strangers were genuinely concerned about them and sought their contact. The initial mistrust had waned, and they began to engage with one another. From then on, the Spaniards spent most of their holidays and long weekends in the village. At first, Rafael and Violeta were deeply affected by the families' grief and shocked by the poverty they encountered in the village. Their initial impulse was to assist in whatever way, and during their earliest visits they left their clothes, money and other belongings there. Moreover, when they took on the responsibility to help finding, identifying and repatriating the bodies of those who died during the shipwreck and when they participated at their funerals in Hansala, the Spaniards tied a bond with the villagers. Rafael described how this intimate connectedness was simultaneously marked by difference and sameness:

> A boy was washed ashore dead while I was teaching a class to another boy of the same age. […] The dead boy has a father and a mother. I wanted to get to know them; I wanted to tell them that their son died where I'm working as a teacher. When I got to know these parents, we hugged. They have their religion and ideas of the world, and I have mine. But it didn't matter because it was such a profound human situation. We tied a bond that exists still today.

The Spaniards acknowledged their sameness as human beings, but, more importantly, they recognized the incommensurability of their experiences caused by their 'utterly different positions' in this world (Eckert 2020). Violeta and Rafael did not deliberately choose to counteract the lethal consequences of the EU border regime, rather, they were existentially required and felt obliged to do something meaningful. They opened themselves up to the fate of others. Anthropologists Elisabeth Kirtsoglou and Dimitrios Theodossopoulos call such an openness 'empathy'. According to them, empathy is the 'capacity to teach oneself how to imagine the world from the other's point of view' and they further argue that empathetic capacity 'can be seen as affirmative political praxis established in radical imagination' (2018: 105). Empathy is an ethical response that first takes form as an affect and manifests itself in bodily and instantaneous responses to others. The Spaniards' openness to the call of others, their capacity to empathize as well as their political aspirations compelled them to search for the bereaved families in Morocco. What allowed them to act in the way they did, however, was their privileged position to cross the Spanish-Moroccan border whenever they needed as well as their economic independence. Yet, although the families from the Moroccan villages did not have the same legal and economic means, they were not powerless in their encounter with the Spaniards. Rather, their loss, their grief and their difficult living conditions tied the Spanish to them. Building on Levinas, Kevin O'Neill argues that such an

asymmetrical attachment is caused by the fact that the self is not asked to respond to the call of another, rather, it is demanded (O'Neill 2020: 182). Hence, the ethical relationship between the Spaniards and Moroccans can be understood as an inherently unequal relationship 'of the self with the primal Other' (Alvi 2020: 158). The dead (and their bereaved families) and the Spanish couple were not equal, rather, the former took priority over the self of the latter (Alvi 2018: 160; Butler 2012: 140). Even though they are located on different sides of the EU's external border and on different edges of the political and economic spectrum, the people from Hansala called upon the Spaniards, who, in turn were open to receive this call. Such a responsiveness to an others' call is not only a central feature of the affective capacity of empathy but a key motivator to make people act against injustice, inequality and murderous regimes. Affective capacities such as empathy, openness or mere sensibility are incredibly important for community building. Without them, communication, cooperation, reliability and trust could not emerge.

In order to collaborate officially, and perhaps even to seal the cooperation agreement, the Spaniards founded the NGO 'Solidaridad Directa'. Together with the Moroccans, they sought to create something new in the spirit of 'direct participation'. They tried to build 'a real school of democracy', in which each person critically engages with herself in relation to the other.' With the aim of building an egalitarian solidarity relationship, they wanted to counteract development projects based on charity, which were prevalent in central Morocco at the time and claimed that 'in a society in which nobody wants to participate . . . it is necessary to develop participatory projects . . . carried out directly by ordinary people [personas sencillas]' (Perl 2018: 97). Over the course of almost a decade, the Spanish couple drove the more than 600km south several times a year to spend their holidays and long weekends in the Moroccan village. They lived in the farmers' houses, shared their everyday lives and cooperated economically. A succession of friends came along, and to date more than one hundred people from Spain and other European countries have travelled to Hansala. Extremely critical of government funded development projects, the Spaniards did not accept any state or EU subsidies that were occasionally offered to them. Using their own financial resources and working together with the people from the Moroccan village, they electrified houses, asphalted important connecting roads, built an irrigation ditch and a medical dispensary and refurbished the school. The people of Hansala often stressed how their living conditions have improved since the arrival of the Spanish. Ali, for instance, explained that due to the asphalting of the main road the village in the mountains had become connected to the towns in the valley, allowing more farmers to sell their products at larger markets or enabling others to open small businesses in the valley. In addition, a school bus system was created, enabling many more teenagers to continue attending school. The most prominent narrative I came across many times in Hansala was that 'although something bad had happened, something good came out of it'. Whilst not everyone benefited to the same extent and some felt completely excluded from translocal cooperation (see Perl 2019a, 2019b), in the case of this specific boat sinking, the individual deaths had become the tragic possibility for a new beginning for many people in Morocco and in Spain.

But what made the Spanish couple change their lives so radically by committing themselves to the fate of others for so many years?

Over the course of ten years, the Spaniards and Moroccans decided collectively what work needed to be done to improve the living conditions in the village. The former then provided the necessary material and occasionally also the know-how, and one person from each family of the village gave their workforce to successfully implement the respective project. This process was built on trust. The Spanish had to rely on the projects being implemented as agreed and the Moroccans had to trust that the Spanish would come back and continue to pay for materials, transport costs and the like. The cooperation did not consist of one big promise made by the Spaniards, but rather, it consisted of small and everyday promises. The mutual compliance with the agreements bound the people together and tied them to a common cause. The simple question 'what do you need', the act of sharing means and the readiness to give one's own workforce bear a promise. These gestures say: I care about you and your needs enough to make your situation my concern. They also say: I trust in the sincerity of your concern for me (for a more elaborated discussion of the solidarity of concern, see Eckert 2020). When we make a promise to others, we also make it to ourselves in the sense that keeping a promise means that the other person can trust my word and that I remain faithful to myself. As such, the promise has a 'moral force' (Das 2015: 62) – just consider the guilty conscience that haunts you when you break a promise. The promise thereby not only makes others dependent on me and me dependent on others, it also obliges me to remain truthful to my word. Standing to my word becomes the necessary condition to remain who I am, to become who I aspire to be and as whom I want to be seen. By keeping a promise, I prove that my word, and thus I myself, are trustworthy. Only when others believe and perhaps have already experienced that I keep my promise, will they believe my further promises. Making a promise therefore means that I take responsibility for the credibility of my word. Hence, if empathy is the precontractual precondition to tie a bond with others, the promise is the contract that solidifies these relationships. A promise, although fragile, expresses an intention, conveys a sense of stability and is oriented towards the future. It is a commitment about an act to be done and a relationship to continue. As such, the promise is the fundamental condition for the duration of solidarity. As a promise is made time and again, so is the decision to take on responsibility for common cause. Solidary relationships do not ground in taking once a decision to collaborate and then sticking with it, rather, the decision has to be made repeatedly. When committing oneself to a cause or to other people, the ethical obligation to recurrently do so grows.

Besides the moral force of the promise, I believe however, that the desire to engage with others, the joy of experiencing the different and embracing the unexpected as well as the readiness to change one's own life are pivotal for lasting solidarity relationships. It is not only the moral duty to care for others, but also the desire to counteract global injustices through lived solidarity, as well as the hope to initiate political and personal change through the serendipitous affection between strangers who ultimately become friends.

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