

Solidarity is often seen as decoupled from, or even in tension with, issues of stability and order. This is an unnecessary and dangerous juxtaposition. A realistic reading of solidarity can highlight the connection with the idea of stability and—contrary to cosmopolitan interpretations—show that solidarity is, in the long term, in the enlightened self-interest of the better off.

Calls for more solidarity abound among European Union politicians, public intellectuals, and academics. Jean-Claude Juncker, for instance, entitled his [2015 State of the Union address](#) “Time for Honesty, Unity and Solidarity”. In his recent book, philosopher Jürgen Habermas considers the “[decisive question \[...\] how far the populations of the Eurozone now find themselves in a historic setting which calls for ‘solidarity’](#)”. Finally, the idea of solidarity is often invoked by academics: political scientists, who see social welfare measures as a tool for state building, and political philosophers, who see it as a requirement of justice.

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However, these exhortations are often vague or implausibly idealistic. They are vague because the history of the concept of solidarity (two recent important ones are [Brunkhorst](#) and [Stjernø](#)) is as contradictory as it is rich. They are idealistic because the ambitious moral requirements they impose on people find little political purchase among actual citizens. It is possible however to clarify the concept and scale back its moral requirements.

Charity vs. solidarity

The starting point for this is going back to the historical roots of the name “solidarity”. This was first used by [Pierre Leroux](#) in direct contradiction to compassion and charity, as they were understood in the catholic tradition. Charity's emphasis is in personal, spontaneous and direct help to the disadvantaged. It is always better to help one with one's own action, rather

than giving money or paying someone else to do it. Moreover, an act of charity should come from one's consciousness, and not be prompted by external obligations: coerced charity is not charity at all. On the contrary, solidarity is linked to the welfare state and it implies an institutional and mandatory system to help the less fortunate members of society. It is mandatory, as it is not expected out of our own will but enforced and sanctioned at the political level. We are not, however, required to do it personally, but just to fund an institutional system that can more efficiently organize the assistance to the worse off.

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A more significant distinction, for the present discussion, is that charity is universal in scope, as it applies to all human beings equally. No matter what one's nation, religion or social status is, if one is in need of help he deserves charity. On the other hand, solidarity has an exclusionary dimension. Recently philosophers (such as [Andrea Sangiovanni](#)) have tried to link the notion of solidarity to reciprocity and cooperation. Solidarity, thus conceived, requires us to help not just anyone, but those with whom we are entertaining difficult cooperative actions. Since we share with others the effort to reach our goal, we are obliged to compensate them when they come out substantially worse off as a result. According to Sangiovanni, this applies strictly to social movements, where people cooperate with regards to distinct goals, and loosely to social cooperation within the state, where it gives rise to the welfare state.

Realistic solidarity

Solidarity and charity are often confused. In fact, many have spoken of solidarity as a universal, cosmopolitan demand to help the worse off wherever they are. Leroux's first explicit use of the concept, however, presented a more sober proposal. On a political level,

solidarity is required towards our fellow citizens, and towards European citizens, since in both cases we share with them a considerable institutional framework of cooperation. While charity may oblige one to help the unfortunates on the other side of the earth, solidarity applies to those you are in a sense working with for some common purpose.

So conceived, solidarity is more realistic because its justification does not rely on universal moral claims, whose epistemic status is dubious, and which command limited following in the real world. Rather, its normative core lies in the interests of all parties involved. The link with cooperation suggests that it has an instrumental and yet extremely important value. Solidarity stabilizes cooperative schemes, from which everybody benefits. While the least advantaged benefit directly from its material transfers of resources, the well-off gain from stabilizing the cooperative system from which they extract their welfare. While providing for the worse-off may cost the well-off considerably on the short run, it may be beneficial in the long run as the system becomes more capable to resist disruptive shocks. This is called enlightened self-interest, based on the assumption that if people were better informed about solidarity's true costs and consequences, they would certainly accept it. Refusing solidarity is short-sighted. Solidarity implies a kind of loose reciprocity, insofar as it is a trade of material welfare for legitimacy (i.e. willing compliance with the cooperative system).

A clear example of this is the case of the Greek crisis and the German reaction. Germany is one of the countries benefiting the most from the euro, among other things because the common currency favors German export by eliminating exchange fluctuations. Germany should then find that more solidarity in the Eurozone—in the form of institutional mechanisms to compensate the worse off countries like Greece— is in its own enlightened interest, even if it implies a short-term cost, because it would stabilize the system in the long run. Rejecting solidarity, on the other hand, produces not only economic crises but also the sort of political disruptions that Eurosceptic populism is generating. Solidarity, in sum, need not be opposed to stability: rather, the two are compatible and, in some cases, there can be no stability without solidarity.

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