

Chantal Millon-Delsol

This paper was published in the monthly *Znak* in August 2000, issue 543, pp. 51–59.

Translated by Karolina Sztandar-Sztanderska.

Chantal Millon-Delsol (b. 1947) is a professor of political philosophy and the director of the Laboratory of Research in Philosophy and Political Sciences at the University of Paris-Est. She is the author of numerous books, including: *Essai sur le pouvoir occidental: Démocratie et despotisme dans l'Antiquité* (1985), *Éloge de la singularité: essai sur la modernité tardive* (2000), *La République: Une question française* (2002), *Mythes et symboles politiques en Europe centrale* (ed. with Michel Masłowski, Joanna Nowicki) (2002), *Dissidences* (ed. with Masłowski and Nowicki) (2005). She was awarded the Prix de l'Académie de sciences morales et politiques in 1993 and 2002; Prix Mousquetaire, 1996; Prix de l'Académie Française (Prix Raymond de Boyer de Sainte-Suzanne), 2001. She was elected (June 2007) to the Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques (Institut de France).

The theme of solidarity is used here as an example to demonstrate that the barbarity of civilization is not a negation, but a subversion of the very values of civilization. These values still exist, however, their legitimacy is revised; they are used for other purposes and their collocations have changed. The public opinion reassures itself of their presence, yet, they have lost their proper meaning. Without the majority having realized it, they now play on the barbarian team. The example of solidarity speaks for itself, it is, after all, commonly associated with civilization. However, I would like to prove that our century has produced two types of barbarian solidarity.

### Abstract Solidarity or Justice Without Love

What meaning does solidarity actually have for the modern mind? The triumph of modern rationality ended in identifying solidarity with a radical

distribution, close to mathematical equality. The ancient utopias (Plato, 79 Tommaso Campanella) already proposed to dissolve the family as a nest of solidarity, because it is stained by emotions and limited primarily to a circle of close relatives, hence imperfect. In fact, the distribution based on love was considered egoistic since, obviously, nobody can love everyone equally.

The social project from Gracchus Babeuf to Lenin could be called justice without love (*justice sans amour*), a typical invention of modernity. The distribution of solidarity is deprived of its humanity and planned with sheer rationality. Drawing on Hannah Arendt's thoughts, from *praxis* to *poiesis*; it ceases to be an action (*agir*) in the human world to become an act of recreating the human world. Proportional distribution (*péréquation*) replaces solidarity.

Yet, the functioning of real socialism, despite the historical baggage it left for future generations to remember, is interesting because it affects our present mental habits. In effect, in the domain we are preoccupied with here, as well as in many others, the late-modern European lets himself be shaped unwittingly by an improbable dream of solidarity free of all human additions, the dream of rational justice without love, because love is so imperfect. A good example would be the French welfare state which organises solidarity using the trick of an anonymous tax and the hands of an anonymous civil servant striving to accomplish proportional distribution stripped of irrationality and of the caprices of individual division. The citizen pays substantial social security and welfare taxes so that the state can take care of all the deprived. But the same citizen has less and less sympathy for his less fortunate neighbour because when he helps him directly, adding a kind look or a gesture, he feels like a fool who pays twice. This way eradicates, and deliberately, all the miasmas of compassion and mercy, individual preferences, obligations of gratitude, and the atmosphere of a debt that cannot be paid, in other words, all the attributes of the genuine human solidarity – all too human.

In this way, current societies are organised into collectives or identity-based interest-organisations, governed by a system of adjustments and quotas and preoccupied with the problem of the most rational possible distribution. This is a barbaric “solidarity,” sheltering indifference, egoism and even hatred, because distribution is perceived as an automatic reparation of an injustice of some sort. The individual believes he is self-sufficient and demands his share in social goods which will help him effectively achieve his so-called ontological self-sufficiency. In this respect, the post-modern individual is an heir of the individual previously subjugated to the totalitarian mass depersonalisation and standardisation.

In the realm of justice without love such as totalitarian egalitarianism or anonymous distribution practised by the modern welfare state, sharing has been preserved but without its meaning or rather, it has obtained a new meaning: its goal is now equality, and not solidarity. The distribution is to meet a concrete and precise goal – to re-establish the

80 equality believed to be natural. Yet, true solidarity is a life full of sharing with others (*vie dans le partage*), which does not aim to establish a justice that would finally put the world back together, instead it aims to accept human finitude. The distribution of goods by an anonymous hand does not build solidarity. Only face to face sharing can produce solidarity and give it sense.

The bourgeoisie way of life that calculates feelings and computes even the uncountable has played an essential role in the disenchantment of the West for two centuries, and in the breakdown of solidarity. Thus, paradoxically, as so often in the past, real functioning socialism pursues the objectives of its adversary whom it believes to have defeated. It has inherited from the bourgeois an ethics which kills the spirit by favouring calculating and measuring how much love weighs – all of which works to destroy solidarity.

The outcome of solidarity counts less than the atmosphere in which it unfolds. It is not an accounting technique but a way of life. It cannot be quantified. It was a big mistake of this century to believe that by proportional distribution of incomes, parcelling out of flats, distribution of money, we are capable of inventing a society-in-solidarity. All those technical operations lack the spirit, the spirit which is not just a cherry on top of a cake or an extra smile – the spirit is essential.

## Instinctive Solidarity or Man Reduced to Biology

Let us see now what solidarity means for the post-modern reason. While the meaning of solidarity was distorted in the course of the century, quite recently it has been subject to another subversion. This time it comes right from the roots: solidarity receives new foundations that give it a quite different image.

Previously, ideologies represented systems that were considered carriers of the absolute truth. Conversely, the spirit of late modernity rejects all the truths perceived as a common representation of reality. The latter seems to be a natural consequence of the former, its disapproval and finally, its terrified opposite. The demiurgic absolute of totalitarianism does not have any heirs. It lets its contradiction emerge from its ruins: a new form of nihilism, much different from the nihilism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: it is no longer the nihilism of liberation but rather the nihilism of fear. Every truth becomes monstrous.

It is fascinating to observe how solidarity has been transformed in this evolutionary melting-pot. The demiurgic ideologies aimed to achieve perfect justice and equality, that is, to eradicate solidarity as a value by accomplishing it. Society was to become so eminently permeated by solidarity that the same idea of solidarity could just as well disappear. Taking things logically, the spirit of late modernity with its relativism, deriving from the fear of truth, should have erased solidarity as a witness of the common world that it had already erased; when everyone sets his own

values, solidarity could become an individual and subjective preference neither less nor more important than an arbitrary taste for some kind of cheese. However, this is not the case. Browsing post-modern thought, especially the manifestations which have had influence and which express things with clarity, we will find that Richard Rorty, the pope of relativism (called “pragmatism” by him), chooses to rescue one universal value from the midst of nihilism, and it is solidarity.

It should not be seen as just a trope typical to Rorty’s thought. The sense of the above is more profound: it indicates that nihilism loses its vitality, that its consistent cynicism cannot satisfy us any longer. The need to get involved with other people, and thus the need for compassion and sharing imposes itself unwittingly.

Nonetheless, post-modern solidarity lacks both a foundation and reason since the “grand narratives” of the truth have been done away with. To be more precise, Rorty and some other postmodernists refuse to agree that the value of solidarity is based on axioms shared by a group or culture, since the latter entail some specific definitions of what human goodness is and are founded on knowledge and “narratives” that exclude one another. Solidarity founded on knowledge or beliefs – new ideologies, visions of the world and religions – would take us back to the era preceding the modern ideologies.

That is why for Rorty the concept of solidarity must not refer merely to involvement with members of a society or a group and to the idea of sharing with them, but it has to do with all people. Since solidarity does not have any cultural roots, it can only be concerned with the whole of mankind. Then, what are its roots and how can we justify it? Fearing that solidarity could grow roots in a particular culture and become incapable of defining the culture of the entire humankind, postmodernity gives justification for solidarity from, so to say, below – through biology. The contemporary mind started perceiving human sympathy and animal empathy as almost identical constructs. Solidarity stripped off or liberated from its metaphysical, religious and ethical foundation becomes instinctive and abstract. Ethics without mediation and roots in some kind of knowledge gets reduced to something that only resembles it in the animal world.

Hence the interest in primatology in our times. Zoologists tell us that apes have their morality. They are capable of empathy that could be called a form of solidarity of a type where we may legitimately ask “what is the difference,” as the famous primatologist Franz de Waal says, “between the attitude of a chimpanzee who caresses his comrade, victim of an aggression, or who shares food with his hungry pal, and a man who hugs a crying child or voluntarily participates in the distribution of soup to the poor?”<sup>1</sup> The author concludes: “It seems we have reached the point where researchers have enough knowledge to tear morality away from the hands of philosophers . . . The moral sense stems from certain regions in

---

<sup>1</sup> *Le bon singe* [Good Natured: The Origins of Right and Wrong in Humans and Other Animals], Bayard 1997, p. 264.

82 the brain.”<sup>2</sup> In the past few years, our scientific and philosophical reviews are full of analyses of this type.

Thereby primatology justifies a purely emotional type of solidarity coming from the guts, rather than the heart. After considering himself a demiurge, disillusioned man, at the turn of the century considers himself an animal.

Yet the instinctive solidarity, ignoring any arguments that could justify it, is unable to convince anyone to follow it. Because an emotion is not a good argument and cannot be shared automatically. What could I tell a person who claims that solidarity is foolish and commends cynicism? Not knowing how to convince him – since I have no argument or criteria of judgement – I can do nothing but wage war against him, or if I am reluctant to use violence, I can ostracise him. The morality based on instincts knows no words but insults. It is an ersatz morality, constantly balancing between sentimentality and war.

This most recent form of solidarity is a reaction to a more general phenomenon of the ethics of emotion, emotivism, which flourishes following the rejection of certainties. Ethics does not vanish – being so intrinsically human – but is based only on emotional criteria. Our contemporaries are not cynical. They want well-being for their peers. But when the criteria that help us to tell the right from wrong have disappeared, they identify the wrong by the indignation it provokes, and the right by the pity it provokes. Indignation and pity are instinctive and erratic emotions that are valid only for an instant and are not bound by any hierarchy of values or moral judgements. It is all about a morality of the guts, which is the reason why everything gets blurred so easily. Voluntarily detached from culture, this anaemic figure of solidarity is also a barbarian figure.

## Civilised Solidarity or Solidarity of the Shaken

Solidarity and animal empathy are not the same. It does not strive to wholly liberate mankind from inequalities. It arises in the animal aware of its finitude, in a human being. It means that humans beings are brothers involved in a tragedy. It is a notion analogous to the one Jan Patocka uses while speaking about nations: the solidarity of the shaken. Solidarity occurs only when insufficiency and finiteness are recognised and acknowledged. It is the very wound, that can neither be negated nor healed, that reunites us. Yet, solidarity is capable of transforming this vulnerability into glory.

We want to be in solidarity not just because this wound makes us all alike – it would be animal empathy or the instinctive compassion of emotivism. We want to be in solidarity because we participate, each of us according to his respective role, in giving this wound its meaning. Solidarity is not confined to reducing the suffering of others for I could find myself in his place, or to co-suffering that makes suffering more endurable because we can share it. Solidarity means elevating love beyond

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 273.

suffering to show that the human wound is not entirely unarmed, without any recourse, or, in other words, that the wound is not the only human quality. Solidarity is not limited to dressing the wound or indemnifying it. Solidarity is the love that responds to the wound and to the shared experience of otherness.

It is both the atmosphere of sharing, and its results, that count when we talk about solidarity. It cannot be measured or converted to dollars or tons. Solidarity is a collective creation of meaning. Therefore, it is impossible to detach it from the cultural reality of the group of humans that experience it. As a specific relation between humans, solidarity is always anchored in a culture and diffused in it. Man does not exist in a void and as a creature of relations he is bound to a culture. The desire to invent universal solidarity, detached from cultural reality, and hence from shared knowledge and beliefs, draws upon the Rousseauian conviction that man becomes better when he is freed from his culture. Yet a human without culture is instead a barbarian, in other words, a creature without language, thus, deprived of any relations.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century will need an incarnate solidarity: attached to both human finitude and the cultures that give this finitude a sense, each of them in its different way.

The incarnation of solidarity, contrary to the abstract solidarity of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, will at the same time begin a rediscovery of the spirit of sharing contrary to the quantification of solidarity or to the recognition limited to its results. Finally, this double nature will need to be defined.

The word “share” (*partager*) has two almost opposite meanings: we can get a share in a cake (fruits of the crop) and we share convictions. In the first case, to share means to divide, to give everybody a piece, this way we parcel out the fruits of the crop: an individual claims his part in social benefits. In the second case, to share means something opposite: to participate in the same reality together. Here, an individual builds his certainties and projects in relation to other people with whom he can both cooperate or quarrel.

When we share a cake, it diminishes. When we share convictions, they thrive. We could also state it in a different way: the economy distributes because we will never have enough goods to satisfy everyone’s desires, while religion and politics can bring people together because immaterial goods increase when shared. This is how we can comprehend the symbolism found in the account of the multiplication of bread and fish.

We have to rebuild our common certainties (political and religious) and our common projects that will give the former a concrete shape unless we want to reduce solidarity to a purely material division of welfare which is necessary but insufficient. In our times, Europeans are afraid of common certainties because they are likely to generate fanaticism – and recent history helps us understand this concern. Today, every truth that wants to spread is considered sectarian, and every defence of a particular culture is identified as a kind of separatism or colonialism. But if we are

84 going to repel all that could lead to excess, we reject existence itself and reduce man to a merely biological creature. If the cultural world was destroyed by totalitarianism, it is, in another way, challenged by the solidarity of emotions which wants to situate itself above every culture.

To conclude, I would like to focus on a detail that could respond – it remains to be seen how effectively – to the essential objection put forward against the concept of barbarity. In fact, this concept is disputable in the sense that we are always barbarians for somebody, or, to put it differently, is an objective definition of barbarity possible at all? It seems to me that a reference to solidarity brings about a positive answer.

Within the barbarity of the civilised, within this, if you will, secondary barbarity, the referents of civilization do not disappear, but they are deprived of their sense and used for other purposes, though they may not be conscious. How can we understand and interpret this reversal? Where is the passage by which it comes through? At what point is the sense reversed? I would say that this passage always concerns, in one way or another, the tissue and the text – in the sense where social tissue is texture, the text is the speech (*parole*) of culture. Barbarity appears when things are decomposing, it appears in the *neg-ligence* (if one refers back to the Latin word), starting with the language and ending with the most intimate human relations. Therefore, without a doubt, distorted solidarity is the one of the most important examples of the transition of civilization to civilised barbarity.

At first, we see a violent and aggressive barbarian. He is alone. This is why he chooses violence as a potential relation. Barbarity is the action of ravelling the cultural text and the social texture. In other words, the opposite of the solidarity that we want to depict.

If we can agree that there is no civilised humanity without the social tissue, then the distortion of solidarity represents a sort of objective indicator of civilised barbarity. It challenges modern and contemporary prejudices. The religion of equality, in the era of the French Revolution, as well as in the early symptoms that had been felt long before, eradicates the will to differentiate between people. Tocqueville had already shown that equals, those who are similar, lose, at the same time, the need for any relation. Contrary to all the prejudices, equality is the opposite of solidarity which connotes the need for the other. Hence, as Jean-François Mattéi puts it, referring to Goethe in his *La barbarie intérieure* (PUF, 1999, p.19), one can also identify barbarity with contempt for excellence: excellence demands comparison, and equals do not compare themselves to one another, or, rather, they estimate the differences only to decrease them. The society of abstract distribution can only divide, since everyone takes away his part as deserved, and in this way, he neither owes nor demands anything from anybody. The society of sharing in solidarity is a tissue of words, gifts and counter-gifts that assume differences, thus inequalities. Barbarity expresses itself by a claimed solitude, understood as self-sufficiency.