
La solidaridad. Historia, concepto, propuesta

(Solidarity. History, concept, proposal)

Gabriel Amengual Coll

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In this book, professor emeritus Gabriel Amengual offers a critical study of the concept of solidarity. It is not a mere introduction or a summary of the concept's historical development, or even a prescriptive theory on how we should use it. Amengual's undertaking is expository, as well as speculative, yet also geared at the practical exercise of solidarity today. The outcome is an extraordinarily profound, exhaustive and enjoyable book.

As the author states in the introduction, the purpose of the book is to revive the meaning of solidarity and to debate what prospects of action it can offer us today (p. 17). According to Amengual, this project is particularly necessary at times like today, when the meaning of the concept has been inflated (p. 19).

Regarding the organisation of the book, it is divided into five thematic sections which are subdivided into 18 chapters. The first four sections, which are spread over 16 chapters, are devoted to outlining the historical and intellectual background of the idea of solidarity from its modern inception until today. Each of the chapters in these sections explains a specific thinker's contribution to the evolution of the concept. Finally, Amengual reserves the last chapter and section of the book to his own reflections on how solidarity should be understood and exercised in today's societies, taking into consideration the elements developed throughout the book. It is an intuitive, accessible organisation which quickly becomes clear to the reader.

The first section focuses on the earliest underpinnings of the concept and primarily traces the eighteenth-century contributions of Pierre Leroux, Constantine Pecqueur, Ferdinand Lassalle and John Stuart Mill. Some of the most significant themes in the discussion on solidarity can be detected in their approaches, such as the tension between individual and community—or liberalism and socialism—which determines the conditions of possibility of exercising solidarity. On the other hand, Amengual successfully identifies the model that each author uses to

ground the virtue of solidarity. For example, Leroux and Pecquer justify the bond of solidarity with anthropological considerations, while Lassalle suggests that the facet of solidarity as the protection of vulnerable persons must be one of the purposes of the State (p. 96). Both aspects—solidarity as a social bond of interdependence or as care for the disadvantaged—reappear throughout the book, taking on new nuances, amendments and variations.

The second and third sections of the book deal with French and German solidarity, respectively, as political and intellectual movements from the second half of the nineteenth century; after the underpinning of the concept was solidified, they promoted its application and defended public policies targeted at remediating the social ills of the era. The French proponents of solidarity, who tended to be secular and republican, had a particularly strong influence. Preeminent in this movement are the cooperativism of Charles Gide and the preliminary theorisation of Léon Bourgeois, the latter relying on modern evolutionary biology and the relations of social debt and reciprocity in his thinking about solidarity (p. 209). Also notable is the contribution of Émile Durkheim, who classified the forms of solidarity according to the kind of sociological structure in which they are inserted (pp. 167-171).

German solidarity, in turn, was less influential in its context but also promoted the politicisation of the social and working-class question from different currents using a broad variety of argumentative strategies. They include the Catholic solidarity of Gustav Schmoller, the Christian thinking of Max Scheler and neo-scholastic theology, core exponents of which were Heinrich Pesch, Gustav Gundlach and Oswald von Nell-Breuning. Once again, the authors from this period—and ultimately the majority of proponents of solidarity—strove to explore the space that solidarity could inhabit between individualism and collectivism, while also being concerned with developing new ways of laying down the concept—here based on ontological, theological, anthropological or sociological considerations.

The fourth and last section in the historical survey examines contemporary thinkers from the post-war period in the second half of the twentieth century. Here is where the author ceases focusing on the relationship between the individual and the community to theorise more specifically about special care of marginalised, vulnerable, and disadvantaged persons (p. 244). He notes the influence of Rawls at this point, who proposes what he calls the Difference Principle to protect the disadvantaged and undertakes an original exploration of the fertile connection between solidarity, justice and the welfare state. He also breaks down the thinking of Philippe van Parijs as a critical development of Rawls' work: the Belgian author proposes basic income as a way of implementing the principle of solidarity and the purpose of the State which stems from it (p. 261). Jürgen Habermas is another crucial figure from this period who contributed notably to shaping the contemporary debate. Amengual shows Habermas' implicit treatment of the concept. To Habermas, solidarity has roots in communicative action, which assumes the common interest of autonomous subjects within a shared life context (p. 271). The author illustrates the critiques of Habermas' model through the thinking of Johann Baptist Metz, a German thinker who ushered in political theology. Metz criticised the rule of reciprocity in Habermas'

theory of communicative action, a notion he believes is inapplicable to the relationship of debt which occurs between present generations on the one hand and past or future ones on the other, and the relationship of assistance between those practising solidarity and those receiving it—all of them asymmetrical relationships, at least in practical terms.

The last section is set aside for Amengual's considerations on the challenges and issues of solidarity today. Here is where the author freely plunges into the main questions in the book and draws conclusions on practising solidarity.

The author pays explicit attention to the two basic views on solidarity: as a social bond of individual-society cohesion and as care of the disadvantaged. The former is based on a vision of society as a whole and encourages an analysis of solidarity in terms of reciprocity, organic complementation and relationships similar to contractual ones. The latter focuses on acts of solidarity towards vulnerable and oppressed groups. Both aspects, the author tells us, are complementary, not contradictory. Thus, the experience of the community sense of solidarity enables us to expand the application of the concept beyond the initial group of individuals and extend it to the disadvantaged or outsiders (p. 328).

Even though Amengual suggests understanding the individual-society tension as somehow impossible to overcome, he considers it sustainable if we understand the constitutive bond that links individuals and society together (p. 310). This bond appears plausible to the reader partly thanks to his recapitulation of the different models supporting solidarity, which rely on a broad range of perspectives on human nature and life in society.

However, the author points out that the current debate does not revolve around the theoretical models justifying solidarity but models of action or implementation of the concept, and he cites two dominant models: the wealth distribution model of Rawls and Van Parijs and the communication and the anamnestic and compassionate model of solidarity of Habermas and Metz. Here, individual and community no longer seek to harmonise on the theoretical, abstract plane but are two extremes that coexist in the direct practice of solidarity.

The last part of the book explores the actions and ways of applying solidarity that are required today, which, according to the author, pose unique challenges associated with globalisation, the backsliding of the welfare state and poverty—which must also inform the use of the concept. Here, the author makes solidarity proposals regarding the third world, poverty, ecology, immigrants and women. His approaches include incorporating immigrants into host societies on no basis other than the fact that they are people (p. 344) and recognising women as oppressed and defending their perspective and different ethical vantage point.

As a particularly distinctive note, Amengual proposes breaking with the cultural dogmas that he believes are harmful: first, that the standard of living of the wealthiest, either individuals or countries, is unnegotiable, and secondly, that this standard of living can become universal in the medium or long term (p. 340). In consequence, he suggests acknowledging the limits of

growth and adhering to a ‘solidarity-based austerity’, given that exercising solidarity means making sacrifices or allowing one part to give something up, as Amengual reminds us, so that the other can gain.