

Examining Solidarity through the Lens of Agamben, Dean, and Featherstone

Books reviewed

- Giorgio Agamben, *'The Coming Community,'* (Minnesota: Minnesota University Press, 2007) [first edition published in 1990 by La Comunità cbe Viene, Turin] - 120 pages
- Jodi Dean, *'Solidarity of Strangers, Feminism after Identity Politics,'* (California: UC PRESS, 1996) - 290 pages
- David Featherstone, *'Solidarity, Hidden Geographies of Internationalism,'* (London: Zed Books, 2012) - 320 pages.

Keywords

Solidarity – Political Agency - Giorgio Agamben – Jodi Dean – David Featherstone -International Relations

Abstract

On June 4th, 1989, the Chinese People's Liberation Army opened fire on peaceful protesters who had formed a community without “any preexisting conditions of belonging or likeness.” In his book *"The Coming Community,"* Giorgio Agamben defined this type of community as one where "singularities form a community without affirming an identity, that humans co-belong without any representable condition of belonging."¹ Agamben's work challenges traditional notions of solidarity by emphasizing the political agency of groups that bond in this way. Jodi Dean, in *"Solidarity among Strangers, Feminism after Identity Politics,"* discusses the concept of solidarity in relation to identity politics and the idea of a "we without labels."² In turn, David Featherstone has built upon this foundation to underline the political agency of solidarity regarding the study of International Relations in his book *"Solidarity,"* which focuses on how people create solidarities from below and the potential for international solidarity to reshape the world on “more equal terms.”³ This book review will address how these views on solidarity relate to one another—prying the reader to the significance of the subject matter. Additionally, this review will examine how significant these works are compared to contemporary literature.

Book review

Agamben lays the foundation for thinking about solidarity in *"The Coming Community,"* Originally published in 1990, Agamben's nineteen essays combine his thoughts on the fundamental question of being. Announcing his intentions in his first chapter, poetically coined “Whatever,” he translates “The Whatever” as something that always matters, which is the singularity of being. According to Agamben, the individual and the concept of universality need not be at odds. His notion of solidarity can be defined as beings coming together while being decoupled from a specific set or class, uniting without any sense of

¹ Giorgio Agamben, *'The Coming Community,'* (Minnesota: Minnesota University Press, 2007), 85.

² Jodi Dean, *'Solidarity of Strangers, Feminism after Identity Politics,'* (California: UC PRESS, 1996), 29.

³ David Featherstone, *'Solidarity, Hidden Geographies of Internationalism,'* (London: Zed Books, 2012), 4.

belonging or likeness.⁴ Contemporary researchers often see Agamben's work as building on Michel Foucault. Agamben differs, however, in his definition of the Foucauldian idea of the 'dispositif' and his belief in ontology and immanent politics as a form of resistance.⁵ Agamben's "Whatever being" is not indifferent to the view of the universal, where all particularities are of indifferent importance concerning "the universal," which gives them their meaning. Agamben's fifth essay: "*Principium Individuationis*," tells of solidarity that does not concern essence, deriving from his take on Spinoza's concept of an inessential commonality that makes singularity possible. Agamben takes some liberty with this definition of "essence," straying from Spinoza's origins of natural things always possessing a unique essence coexisting with a general species-like essence.⁶ Agamben's mention of Spinoza's essence and solidarity without essence is confusing. However, he beautifully describes his desire for 'the being' that is both indifferent to the particular and generic, which defines his "coming community."⁷ In his fifteenth essay, "*Without Classes*," Agamben shows his vision of today's world. A world in which there are no longer social classes but a single community of a petty bourgeoisie in which all old social classes are dissolved. This group has inherited the world and represents a form in which humanity has survived nihilism. According to the author, this petty bourgeoisie is moving toward its own destruction. Agamben suggests that instead of continuing to search for a form of identity, humans should strive towards forming a singularity without identity and create a community without presuppositions and subjects.⁸

In his last essay, he defines the politics of "whatever singularity" as a struggle between the State and non-State (humanity) rather than a struggle for control of the State. A vital section where David Featherstone's consideration for "engaging unequal or uneven relations" was most likely inspired. Agamben speaks of the Chinese demonstrations of 1989, in which the demands were not clearly defined, and the violence of the State was entirely unjustified. He vividly demonstrates that the State cannot tolerate a community of beings that co-belong without any representable condition of belonging and identity. He concludes that wherever these "whatever singularities" peacefully demonstrate their being in common, there will be a violent response from the State.⁹ However, Agamben does not provide any additional examples apart from Tiananmen to support the idea.¹⁰

Jodi Dean's book "*Solidarity of Strangers, Feminism after Identity Politics*" mainly focuses on reflective solidarity, bridging the gap between identity and universality. She argues that understanding the "we without labels" will allow us to overcome dualist concepts and create solidarities disregarding differences. Dean defines reflective solidarity as rooted in feelings and emotions like mutual care and concern, differing from Richard Rorty's concept based on shared interests.¹¹ She states that real solidarity is based on love and connection,

⁴ Agamben, '*The Coming Community*', 8-9.

⁵ The 'dispositif' is defined as a sort of apparatus that controls and orders subjects and is the target for forms of resistance. As explained in: Tom Frost, 'The Dispositif between Foucault and Agamben,' *Law, Culture and the Humanities*, 15:1 (2015), 151-171. Additionally, I highly recommend reading up on immanent politics to understand Agamben's position, found in: Jason Lim, 'Immanent Politics: Thinking Race and Ethnicity through Affect and Machinism', *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 42: 10 (2010), 2393-2409.

⁶ Karolina Hübner, 'Spinoza on Essences, Universals, and Beings of Reason,' *Pacific philosophical quarterly* 97:1 (2016), 58-88.

⁷ Agamben, '*The Coming Community*,' 17-22.

⁸ Ibid, 63-67.

⁹ Ibid, 85-89.

¹⁰ Ibid, 86.

¹¹ See Richard Rorty, '*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*,' (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

specific to individuals, and appeals to it rather than demanding it.¹² Dean also describes the relationship between identity politics and democracy. She argues that not all political issues are identity matters, and that identity politics can prevent us from looking at problems beyond identity, such as class, health care, and nuclear waste. Without certain foundations or traditions capable of bringing us together, reflection becomes the basis of our shared connection. This leads to reflective solidarity, which is rooted in our ability to connect with each other through contestation and critique.¹³ What strengthens Dean's work is her ability to provide concrete examples of reflective solidarity. With this, she inspired other researchers to do the same, such as Birte Siim and Susi Meret, who researched migrant solidarity and resistance in Copenhagen and Berlin. In their contemporary work from 2021, they confirm Dean's definition that practicing reflective solidarity requires constant effort and is not determined by shared conditions or ideals.¹⁴

Following identity politics, Dean explores the concept of plurality and how it relates to the inclusion of women in civil society. With plurality, Dean means that every group within society can continue having different traditions and interests. She states that with an end to the separation between the public and private spheres, women can be included on the stage of society, and plurality can be achieved. This equality is necessary for true reflective solidarity to be created and requires an end to the male dominance of the balance between the two spheres.¹⁵ In this aspect, Dean's work stands apart from Agamben and Featherstone, who neglect to define the effects of plurality on solidarity. In this, she adds to the field by setting apart a new set of conditions that must be met to achieve Featherstone's "more equal terms." Dean argues that universalism is the best approach for addressing feminist issues of inclusion and accountability in her final chapter. She proposes a hypothetical third, allowing us to take accountability and question norms. She critiques binary oppositions and masculine presumptions and argues that her definition of reflective solidarity provides more equality.¹⁶

In his book "Solidarity," Featherstone argues that solidarity is critical in understanding international politics and can transform the world on "more equal terms." He examines the impact of solidarities in creating and destroying political alliances and provides several case studies, such as the Cardiff dockworker's refusal to unload Italian goods. He defines solidarity as inspired by the political agency of individuals and groups rather than a traditional expression of common humanity, portraying it as a means of creating solidarities from below.¹⁷ According to Featherstone, these constructed solidarities can be transformative in politics. Relatable to Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann *histoires croisées*. Their focus on entanglement provides new ways of analyzing the links between people across a geographic region, something Featherstone exploits in his description of border-spanning solidarities.¹⁸ Featherstone attempts to make solidarity more pragmatic by providing case studies. Defining it as humans achieving unity in pursuing a unified selection of aims or objectives, such as his depiction of the solidarity formed by the Pan-African movement during

¹² Dean, 'Solidarity of Strangers', 30.

¹³ Ibid, 74.

¹⁴ Birte Siim and Susi Meret. 'Patterns of Reflective Solidarity and Migrant Resistance in Copenhagen and Berlin', *Critical Sociology*, 47:2 (2020), 219-233.

¹⁵ Dean, 'Solidarity of Strangers', 101.

¹⁶ Ibid, 174.

¹⁷ Featherstone, 'Solidarity,' 19.

¹⁸ Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann, 'Beyond Comparison: Histoire Croisée and the Challenge of Reflexivity.' *History and Theory* 45:1 (2006), 30–50.

the Italian invasion of Ethiopia.¹⁹ However, Featherstone fails to touch on aspects raised by Stuart Hall in his work on the concept of 'Otherness.' Hall's analysis of European indifference towards post-colonial migration, which is at odds with Western rationalism, modernity, and liberal tolerance, provides an example of a political form of solidarity that is not left-oriented.²⁰ The existence of non-leftist solidarities is mentioned by Featherstone but never thoroughly addressed. Featherstone critiques previous definitions of solidarity, yet he aligns with Dean's criticism of Richard Rorty. Confusingly, his definition of solidarity emphasizes aims and objectives, much like Rorty's definition, which focuses on shared interests and concerns. Featherstone highlights internationalism as crucial for defining relationships between and within places and states that subaltern approaches such as texts, songs, and testimonies help shape solidarity.²¹ He warns against viewing subaltern political cultures as autonomous, stressing the importance of considering them equally with "elite political cultures." He argues that without addressing unequal relationships, marginalized forms of political agency cannot be asserted, and solidarity cannot be achieved.²²

Additionally, Featherstone dedicates an entire chapter to Cold War solidarity in his work, highlighting the danger of a triumphalist Cold War narrative promoting uniform neoliberalism, as explained by E.P. Thompson.²³ This narrative has led us to marginalize the impacts of the independent peace movement during the Cold War. The solidarities formed within these alliances had a significant impact on bringing the conflict to an end, paying tribute to how the concept can shape political agency. In his 7th chapter, Featherstone repairs his earlier neglect of feminist movements by presenting some of the effects different feminist movements have had on shaping resistance to globalization and forming strong border-crossing solidarities.²⁴ Lastly, Featherstone praises Agamben's concept of solidarity without essence yet criticizes Dean's expression of a "singular community of us all." Featherstone denounces Dean's universalism as "underpinning solidarity" since it does not consider fractured and contested political struggles and communities.²⁵ Nevertheless, further reading shows Featherstone's idea of solidarity is similar to Dean's reflective solidarity and Agamben's solidarity without essence, as it also defines solidarity as a "we" without labels.

Conclusion

Although Agamben's essays provide a rich starting point for exploring solidarity, they could be more nuanced and concise. The essay "*Without classes*" fails to showcase the complex dynamics of class systems, identity, and politics. In addition, the proposed solution for overcoming the problem of a self-destructing society needs to be well-developed and thoroughly explained. This can partly be forgiven since his essays aim to stimulate thoughts and further research, not provide a comprehensive analysis of social, psychological, and political phenomena. Jodi Dean goes further by addressing individualism, identity, and gender. She firmly outlines the tensions between identity and universality, both in the public and the private spheres. Featherstone's book provides study cases that help understand his definition of internationalist geographies and their border-crossing solidarities. However, he

¹⁹ Featherstone, '*Solidarity*', 103.

²⁰ Stuart Hall, 'Europe's Other Self,' *Marxism Today* 35:8 (1991), 18-19.

²¹ Featherstone, '*Solidarity*', 64.

²² *Ibid*, 65.

²³ *Ibid*, 181.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 208.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 38.

is lacking in some respects, such as his criticism regarding others' definition of solidarity and the underwhelming address of non-leftist solidarities. However, the author redeems himself by highlighting the alternative connections between places that are the stark opposite of unequal formations, like colonialism, globalization, and the Cold War, concluding that solidarity can be defined as a world-making process.

Those interested in the theory and future possibilities of solidarity for political activism need not look further. These authors strongly detail how solidarity can create networks, connections, and relations that cross boundaries and borders.

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