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## Between innocence and deconstruction: rethinking political solidarity

### Blog entry

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# The Disorder Of Things

For the Relentless Criticism of All Existing Conditions Since 2010

## Between Innocence and Deconstruction: Rethinking Political Solidarity

JANUARY 11, 2015 / GUEST AUTHORS

The third and final post in our short resilience and solidarity forum, this time from Chris Rosssdale (<https://pure.royalholloway.ac.uk/portal/en/persons/chris-rossdale%28a0b8cb50-cb54-422b-9024-b427f8426f92%29.html>). Chris lectures in International Relations at Royal Holloway, University of London. His research focuses on anti-militarist social movements and radical political theory. He has also recently edited a special issue of *Globalizations* on radical political subjectivities, his own contribution (<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14747731.2014.971542#.VKw1WmTF8Yc>) exploring the relationship between Emma Goldman and Friedrich Nietzsche through the concept of dance. He can be reached by email thusly (<mailto:chris.rossdale@rhul.ac.uk>).

The ethos of solidarity remains one of the left's most powerful and enduring ideas, a clarion call for collective struggle in the face of international borders and neoliberal individualism. At the time of writing, my social media feeds are awash with calls for solidarity with Ferguson; thousands also turned out to a solidarity protest at the US embassy ([http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2014/11/26/ferguson-protest-held-outside-us-embassy-in-london\\_n\\_6227986.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2014/11/26/ferguson-protest-held-outside-us-embassy-in-london_n_6227986.html)). Last week I attended a solidarity fundraiser for the Kurdish Red Crescent, took part in an action (<https://storify.com/PalestineAction/stoparmingisrael-day-of-action-against-barclays>) organised to coincide with UN International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People (<http://www.un.org/en/events/palestinianday/>), and circulated a petition in solidarity with students who experienced police violence at the University of Warwick. Rarely a day passes at present without some (<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/nov/11/ebola-africa->

[band-aid-three-things\) fresh \(https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/tooni-akanni/confronting-ebola-in-liberia-gendered-realities-0\)](https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/tooni-akanni/confronting-ebola-in-liberia-gendered-realities-0) [discussion \(http://www.democracynow.org/2014/11/3/angelique\\_kidjo\\_dont\\_let\\_the\\_ebola\)](http://www.democracynow.org/2014/11/3/angelique_kidjo_dont_let_the_ebola) about the particular politics involved in different forms of solidarity with those suffering from the outbreak of Ebola. Across different modes, the practice of solidarity is a part of our everyday political conduct.



[https://thedisorderofthings.files.wordpress.com/2015/01/rossdale\\_pic1.png](https://thedisorderofthings.files.wordpress.com/2015/01/rossdale_pic1.png)  
 Protestors march after gathering outside the American Embassy in London November 26, 2014, to show [solidarity with the family of black teenager Michael Brown](http://newsdaily.com/2014/11/grand-jury-expected-to-resume-ferguson-police-shooting-deliberations/) (<http://newsdaily.com/2014/11/grand-jury-expected-to-resume-ferguson-police-shooting-deliberations/>) who was shot and killed by a police officer in August in Missouri. REUTERS/Paul Hackett

On the one hand, this is clearly a good thing, enabling common political, financial and emotional resources to be shared in important and useful ways. Distance, whether spatial or cultural, can be an alienating force, and practices of solidarity can serve as a powerful redress to such alienation, asserting collectivity and community in the face of division. In this piece, however, my intention is to outline a critique of much of what passes for solidarity, and suggest that more radical or deconstructive understandings are needed if we wish to produce more substantive challenges to political domination.

The particular practices of solidarity I have in mind are those which occur in those contexts (which are many) in which the imbalance of power directly privileges, at least in some forms, one party over another – whether this is in the context of cis-male solidarity in feminist projects, citizen solidarity in migrant and refugee struggles, or, the particular case study I discuss below, Jewish-Israeli solidarity with Palestinians. One of the great attractions of the idea of solidarity is that it has the capacity to establish more communal understandings and practices whilst paying heed to difference; it gestures towards collective liberation whilst providing spaces to recognise and navigate the ways in which some subjects are privileged within extant relations of power. However, whilst many practices of solidarity are accompanied by an understanding that they take place within a context of unequal power relations, their form can serve to reinforce things at a deeper level.

This happens because practices of solidarity often work to reinforce, rather than challenge or deconstruct, the political position and identity (that is, the subjectivity) of those involved. The expressions of support and common purpose that constitute many solidarity actions, whether this be the sharing of social media messages, attending benefit gigs, sending donations or organising protests, leaves the subjectivities of participants relatively intact; their position within the wider political fabric is not called into question through such actions. Indeed, in reassuring these subjects of their nature as ethically and politically right-on, it can reinforce their status, providing a safe route to good conscience without necessitating any substantial exploration of one's own privileges and presumptions. Solidarity becomes about claiming innocence, rather than acknowledging and beginning from a profound and inexorable culpability.

Many acts of solidarity involve identifying a particular problem and then demonstrating (to others and to oneself) one's distance from this problem. Such a move can be deeply comforting, displacing much of the anxiety we all feel when violence is done in our name or on terms through which we ourselves are privileged. However, it's on these terms that it is also very problematic; it settles the status of the privileged, and so works to fix the wider contours of power. I can express solidarity with the black population of Ferguson and so firm-up my anti-racist credentials without necessarily exploring the ways in which I benefit from white privilege; I can express solidarity with victims of rape without confronting the ways in which normalised forms of masculinity play a role in legitimating and erasing violence against women; or solidarity with Palestinians without challenging the colonial legacies and imaginaries that structure British society. Such thin expressions of solidarity are not just about allaying guilt or covering up brutal complicities; they have an altogether more creative or constitutive role, allowing subjects to assemble noble identities – 'ethical consumer', or 'heroic activist'.

This does not mean that the specific practices of solidarity I highlighted aren't important – they are crucial, both because the practical and political resources that are shared can be invaluable, and because the act of seeking distance from violent power relations is a necessary component of meaningful solidarity. What I want to suggest is that the process must not end here, and indeed must take the dangers I indicated above into account in order to avoid the trappings of a satisfying but ultimately conservative solidarity. What I'm outlining is an understanding of solidarity which understands it as a process intimately concerned with challenging the identities and positions of those engaged, of calling ourselves into question. It is deconstructive, insofar as it demands not just that one acts in relation to and common purpose with others, but that one actively pursues this as a perpetual process of self-change.

The act of declaring a distance from violent power relations – 'not in my name' – is an important performative move that challenges the legitimacy of dominant practices. A deconstructive approach to solidarity recognises this, but also acknowledges that the distance we declare is an aspiration, not a fact: we remain interwoven into the fabric of oppression and violence, privileged and reassured and made safe through operations of power that harm our friends and comrades. The practice of solidarity, meaningful solidarity, is one of undoing this through hard work and joint struggle, in which we continually turn the lens upon ourselves.

I'm outlining two understandings of solidarity, but not trying to argue that any one situation, event or practice fits neatly into one or the other category. Instead, I'm suggesting that there are different dimensions of solidarity, and that situations where the more deconstructive element is absent have substantial limitations and may indeed be actively harmful. I am also not trying to argue that all attempts by people to challenge their own position within violent power relations are successful; most are not. I would, however, claim that when we approach joint political struggle with the attitude that our own presumptions, privileges and lifeworlds might themselves be called into question as we confront injustice, then we hold open more spaces for change.

### **Anarchists Against The Wall**

Thus far, I've laid things out in quite abstract and general terms. For the rest of this post I want to point towards some of the ways in which what I've said might be revealed in the everyday solidarity of one particular group, Anarchists Against The Wall (<http://www.awalls.org/>) (AATW). The group emerged in early-2003 out of protests against the (then initial) constructions of the apartheid wall that the Israeli government was beginning to build. They took influence from the International Solidarity Movement (<http://palsolidarity.org/>) (ISM), a Palestinian-led organisation that involves internationals in joint struggle against the occupation of Palestine. What this has meant in practice is organising marches, civil disobedience, and direct action against the wall.

The group drew widespread media attention in late-2003 when one member, Gil Na'amati, was shot in the leg by an Israeli soldier (<http://electronicintifada.net/content/account-shooting-israeli-protestor-gil-naamati/4930>) while taking part in a demonstration. It was at this point that the name of the group was fixed. Until this point they had used a variety of names, including Jews Against Ghettos, but the media, numbed to Palestinian deaths, took the wounding of a Jewish Israeli seriously; they widely reported on the particular moniker that had been chosen for that action, Anarchists Against the Wall, and so the name stuck. This in itself is not insignificant; while a lot of the group do identify as anarchists, they take pains to point out that discussions about utopias and agreement about grand theoretical programmes is not the point. Their anarchism is expressed through their leaderless practice and their antipathy to forms of resistance which rely on direct appeals to the state for redress. It finds its form in the direct action they take, which has often involved physically intervening to dismantle the barrier, or to inhibit its construction.



([https://thedisorderofthings.files.wordpress.com/2015/01/rossdale\\_pic2.png](https://thedisorderofthings.files.wordpress.com/2015/01/rossdale_pic2.png))

Demonstrators dismantling a part of the wall

([http://www.awalls.org/fragments\\_of\\_struggle\\_new\\_videos\\_of\\_past\\_anarchists\\_against\\_the\\_wall\\_actions](http://www.awalls.org/fragments_of_struggle_new_videos_of_past_anarchists_against_the_wall_actions))  
near the village of Zbuba.

A very central part of the solidarity that participants in AATW actions enact is based around the different ways in which the Israeli military respond to the presence of Israelis in circumstances such as demonstrations. As the ISM identified before AATW, the Israeli army has a different approach to situations when they could cause harm to internationals or Israelis, rather than Palestinians. They are less likely to use live fire (opting instead for rubber-coated steel bullets), less likely to fire indiscriminately, and less likely to escalate situations. Israelis are also able to negotiate with soldiers, whether this be to allow a demonstration to continue, to provide first aid to those injured in confrontations, or simply to buy time. Their solidarity, to an extent, is practiced simply by being present as subjects who complicate the Israeli-soldier/Palestinian-target geography of demonstrations. Such a dynamic has not meant that participants in AATW haven't suffered severe injuries (and, as is widely known, several ISM volunteers were (<http://electronicintifada.net/content/photostory-israeli-bulldozer-driver-murders-american-peace-activist/4449>) murdered (<http://electronicintifada.net/content/not-again-eyewitness-joe-smith-writes-about-shooting-tom-hurndall/4523>) despite their international credentials), and the army still deploys lethal tactics, but it is felt to have a significant effect.

In the negotiation of solidarity on the part of AATW, we get a sense of the second, more deconstructive, form of solidarity I outlined before, and some of the complex negotiations which surround it. In their statements and writings, AATW members are very clear about the importance of practicing their solidarity in a manner which calls their subjectivity and privilege into question, that takes account of the colonial context at every stage, and which nonetheless functions as a form of self-liberation on their own part. In the speech made on the acceptance of the Carl von Ossietzky Medal, awarded (<http://www.anarkismo.net/article/10304>) by the International League of

Human Rights in 2008 (and given jointly to the Bil'in Popular Committee (of Palestinians) and AATW), they said (<http://www.amazon.co.uk/Anarchists-Against-Wall-Palestinian-Interventions/dp/1849351147>):

*Here at this podium, just as in the olive groves of the West Bank, our primary moral duty is not to maintain ideological purity but rather to stand with Palestinians in their resistance to oppression... Here, as in the olive groves, we would like to stress that we are not equal partners but rather occupiers who join the occupied in their struggle. We are aware of the fact that for many, the participation of Israelis in a Palestinian struggle serves as a stamp of approval, but in our eyes this partnership is not about granting legitimacy. The Palestinian struggle is legitimate with or without us. Instead, the struggle is an opportunity for us to cross, in action rather than words, the barriers of national allegiance.[1]*

As they work to dismantle the racist system which privileges their lives over those of Palestinians, AATW members recognise the importance of confronting their own status as colonisers, and of proceeding with humility and caution. The act of solidarity does not confer upon them a higher moral status, or demonstrate their innocence or distance from the wider structure of occupation; rather, their very status as occupiers demands their (deconstructive) solidarity. Whilst this is targeted at the institutional makeup of the occupation, it is also framed as a process of learning and change for those involved. As Yossi Bartal says (<http://www.amazon.co.uk/Anarchists-Against-Wall-Palestinian-Interventions/dp/1849351147>), the joint struggle is mobilised, at least in part, "in order to challenge our own racist and Orientalist attitudes...(I can personally admit that sometimes it was only my emotional connection to my several Palestinian friends that kept me sane under the constant wave of racist and nationalist propaganda). To come together, to live together – Ta'ayush in Arabic – is simultaneously our means and ends" (110-111).



([https://thedisorderofthings.files.wordpress.com/2015/01/rossdale\\_pic3.png](https://thedisorderofthings.files.wordpress.com/2015/01/rossdale_pic3.png))

Anarchist block marching in Tel Aviv anti-siege demo, 2006. Source (<http://www.awalls.org/files/images/Samba.jpg>).

AATW members are also cautious when negotiating the question of solidarity across social and ideological boundaries (rather than just boundaries of 'national allegiance'). It is not uncommon for their critics to point out the supposed hypocrisy of anti-state anarchists working in concert with nationalists, or engaging in struggle without highlighting the patriarchal dimensions of Palestinian society. The anarchists are quick to point out that the Israeli government is adept at mobilising progressive social causes (such as LGBTQ rights – a phenomenon known as 'pinkwashing' (<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/08/against-pinkwashing-israel-201489104543430313.html>)) as a means of delegitimising Palestinians while, as we've learned recently, threatening to out queer Palestinians as a way of blackmailing them into collaboration ([http://www.vice.com/en\\_uk/read/gay-palestinians-are-being-blackmailed-into-working-as-informants](http://www.vice.com/en_uk/read/gay-palestinians-are-being-blackmailed-into-working-as-informants)). Moreover they highlight the fact that, as Israeli subjects, their principle responsibility is to decolonise their own society. Of course, to an extent, this does indicate a certain tension in the practice of solidarity – that it is expressed across myriad boundaries. Roy Wagner offers one interesting negotiation, when he argues that (<http://www.amazon.co.uk/Anarchists-Against-Wall-Palestinian-Interventions/dp/1849351147>):

*Criticizing from my position won't do any good; it will only reassert my position as the white man who knows better and pretends to speak from a higher moral ground. My place, then, is to express solidarity with their struggles on their terms, especially (but not only) where these struggles challenge nationalism and chauvinism, building the scaffolding for our common future struggles for a better future life beyond the occupation (64).*

All of this does not mean that the practice of solidarity is not *also* an act of liberation for members of AATW. This is important – the concept of solidarity revolves around the idea of collective liberation; it is not a gift that is bestowed, but a recognition that my freedom depends on the freedom of others, and that we all suffer (albeit in vastly different and unequal ways) when violence is directed at some in the name of others. As Kobi Snitz writes (<http://www.amazon.co.uk/Anarchists-Against-Wall-Palestinian-Interventions/dp/1849351147>), "to look away...is to lose part of one's humanity. This is a burden that Israelis are enslaved to by fear. In that sense, the act of disobedience and resistance is also an act of personal liberation" (59). In the context of the argument I'm making here, we can see these acts of personal liberation in the terms of a deconstructive solidarity which works to recognise and challenge one's intimate position within violent systems. This is not about a continual turning inwards to guilt-ridden immobilisation, in which we castigate ourselves for every part of who we are and claim fault for everything 'out there'. It's a practice of self-liberation which recognises that the most intimate form of domination is often one which appears to work to our favour.

Of course, these practices of solidarity have their complications; when challenging such entrenched forms of power and privilege, one would expect nothing else. One example concerns the experience of trauma on the part of Israeli activists. Iris Arieli argues that trauma is experienced by many in AATW, but that this is significantly underacknowledged by those involved. Some find processing their trauma illegitimate, because violence



done against them is insignificant in the wider context of the occupation. Arieli cites one interviewee (<http://www.amazon.co.uk/Anarchists-Against-Wall-Palestinian-Interventions/dp/1849351147>):

*I would ride home with other activists, people who were really engaged in this struggle. Especially in the relationship with my ex-partner...The way she sees it, it's the Palestinians who are suffering, and we...we can be an instrument, we do serve some purpose, but our suffering doesn't matter in this situation, there is no room for it...it isn't legitimate (92).*

In the move to recognise their solidarity as a relation rooted in (and deconstructive of) deeply unequal power relations, there is a form of self-denial that views self-care on the part of Israelis as an illegitimate activity. On the first count, this is clearly counter-productive; activists burnout, suffer significant post-traumatic stress, and are less able to support Palestinian struggle. More substantively, it also indicates a form of self-denial that abandons rather than reconstructs the self. This may be understandable, but might also be seen to move from solidarity as deconstruction to solidarity as destruction, in a manner that doesn't necessarily open spaces for new ways of being.

The response to this dynamic on the part of some has been to build more focused support networks for activists suffering trauma, assembling processes of care and recognition. This can be based on quite simple actions – as Arieli writes (<http://www.amazon.co.uk/Anarchists-Against-Wall-Palestinian-Interventions/dp/1849351147>), “a lot of the time support is expressed very technically – as in a place to get rest, food, and bail. When people get arrested and there's someone there to sign your bail, someone who gets you food when you're arrested...things that are really small, but tell you that you're not alone” (97). Such actions show the importance of everyday and practical forms of solidarity that break down neoliberal individualism and empower us to take collective action. In provoking a deconstructive ethos, my point is not to undermine such practices.



([https://thedisorderofthings.files.wordpress.com/2015/01/rossdale\\_pic4.png](https://thedisorderofthings.files.wordpress.com/2015/01/rossdale_pic4.png))

Road blocking by protestors ([http://972mag.com/photo-essay-3-years-of-settlement-struggle-in-sheikh-jarrah/38493/4607185964\\_e27a8b998b\\_o/](http://972mag.com/photo-essay-3-years-of-settlement-struggle-in-sheikh-jarrah/38493/4607185964_e27a8b998b_o/)) in Sheikh Jarrah, 2010.

What I've sketched out here, then, are some suggestions about the ways in which AATW look to practice forms of solidarity that, through processes of joint struggle, specifically seek to deconstruct the subjectivities of Israeli activists. However, from the same campaigns we can draw examples which highlight practices of solidarity-as-innocence. One such example concerns a campaign in which AATW members were heavily involved, the Solidarity Sheikh Jarrah (<http://www.en.justilm.org/>) campaign that took place a few years ago. This campaign focused on stopping right-wing settlers from turning Palestinians out of their homes in East Jerusalem and claiming them for themselves. As well anti-Zionist left-wing groups like AATW and ISM, this campaign saw involvement from the Zionist left. The Zionist left, which includes groups such as Peace Now, focuses on opposing the post-1967 occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, paying less attention to the ethnic cleansing and occupation which preceded the Six Day War. They tend to support a two-state solution which accepts as legitimate (and necessary) an ethnonationalist Jewish state behind the green line, and the dismantling of settlements built beyond that line.

Roy Wagner suggests that the involvement of the Zionist left served, to an extent, to mask the privileges of those involved. Noting that participants tend to come from middle-class Ashkenazi communities, he argues that, in identifying right-wing settlers as *the* problem (rather than a problem), they sanitise their own role both in maintaining the occupation and in benefitting from Jewish ethnic divisions within Israel. As he states, 'it's strictly the right-wing settlers who are at fault and must therefore give up their homes, while economic colonization by the middle class would no doubt continue in the form of 'bilateral economic cooperation' after a Palestinian state is formed' (2013: 66-67). The point here isn't that the campaign was bad in any straightforward sense, nor that the involvement of the Zionist left was unwelcome – that question is more complex. Rather, it's to argue that there's a particular and fundamental limitation at work when solidarity is enacted in such a manner, when it functions as a mechanism of innocence and good conscience. It allows subjects to claim distance from violent structures, even to fashion a bold identity as an opponent of such structures, without substantially challenging the more intimate ways in which they are sustained.

When we allow the practice of solidarity to become a route through which we claim or assert innocence, we blunt its radical edge, turning it into a comforting but ultimately conservative practice that fails to substantively challenge embedded power relations. It is when we acknowledge and work to challenge our complicities, to recognise the ways in which dynamics of oppression work through the very fabric of our identities and everyday practices, that more extensive challenges to political domination might be enacted.

[1] All quotations taken from U. Gordon and O. Grietzer, eds, 2013. *Anarchists Against the Wall* (<http://www.amazon.co.uk/Anarchists-Against-Wall-Palestinian-Interventions/dp/1849351147>), Oakland, CA and Edinburgh: AK Press.

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## 3 thoughts on “Between Innocence and Deconstruction: Rethinking Political Solidarity”

### 1. [Web Album](#)

[JANUARY 12, 2015 AT 2:20 AM](#)

Members of law enforcement in general needs to be educated as they currently have information twisted. Complete ignorance continues to be bliss.

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### 2. [daev1](#)

[JANUARY 13, 2015 AT 4:35 PM](#)

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### 3. [Edward](#)

[JANUARY 15, 2015 AT 12:15 AM](#)

“However, whilst many practices of solidarity are accompanied by an understanding that they take place within a context of unequal power relations, their form can serve to reinforce things at a deeper level.”

The power relations themselves can be problem when you're relying on generalizations that end up marginalizing whoever doesn't fit within the assumed social norms. This is most apparent in the discussion of the sexes where the worst off and most targeted among the poor populations are the men rather than the women. Models of male privilege transposed from the upper classes are foisted on poor minority men who's issues end up being marginalized with claims of 'male privilege'. Clearly these men are not the people powerful men favor so there is no privilege to be had along with living in a reality where other poor men are far more likely to target them with violence than anyone else.

“It is not uncommon for their critics to point out the supposed hypocrisy of anti-state anarchists working in concert with nationalists, or engaging in struggle without highlighting the patriarchal dimensions of Palestinian society.”

If we can't get our heads around the lived reality of disadvantaged men because our gender theories were constructed to favor privileged women who'd rather we focus on themselves we end up with the dysfunctional gender obsessed social justice we now see in the Western World. The flaws of the 'patriarchal' model have been excused for far too long like failing to recognize it's been used throughout history to put men in harms way and prioritize keeping women from harm. This becomes more apparent in conflict zones where men are expected to take up arms and defend the 'innocents'. Men by default are seen as aggressors even if they are non combatants leading to their mass slaughter. The women they leave behind are often subjected to sexual violence but the men are dead. Those who favor women as a victim class will actually frame this as women being the greater victims in this situation and that's a problem. It's why the young men burned alive by Boko Haram didn't make headlines but kidnapped girls from that school did.

Male dominance in societies is an inescapable reality but that uniformly or even mostly being of benefit to men is not reality. When looking at conflict zones like Gaza or the West Bank that shows up in the body count. These are not trivial things and it can make men hostile to those who regard their role as 'the problem' instead of the larger issues affecting those societies like living under occupation for over half a century. It was the Soviet invasion which led to the Taliban gaining power in Afghanistan and we see the West now making scapegoats out of Afghan men by highlighting the mistreatment of women to justify a occupation not unlike Israel with the Palestinians.

The power dynamics that matter most are between the truly powerful state actors and the relatively powerless citizens not people sharing families who love and support one another. Social stability and mobility brings freedom to both sexes in time and we need to make creating a space for that the priority or we risk being distracted to the point of being ineffective in addressing core issues.

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