

A Theoretical Study of Solidarity in American Society: The Case of the “Ground Zero Mosque” Controversy

Fatemeh Mohammadi^{1*}, Hamed Mousavi²

1. PhD Candidate in Anthropology, Carleton University, Canada (Corresponding Author: fatemehmohammadi@gmail.com)
2. Assistant Professor, Department of Regional Studies, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran (hamedmousavi@ut.ac.ir)

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Abstract

The paper uses the case study of the controversy regarding the construction of a mosque near the site of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in Manhattan, New York, to analyze the different theoretical approaches to the concept of solidarity. It is argued that the presence of affectional solidarity which is based on feelings of caring, friendship and love was very limited in the case under study. Instead the primary form of solidarity present in the ground zero mosque debate was conventional solidarity, which is based primarily on common interests and concerns that are established through shared traditions and values. Nevertheless, conventional solidarity uses membership within a group to advocate for solidarity. In many instances however, people in need of solidarity might fall outside of the boundaries of “we,” and as a result limiting the utility of the approach. This is why the paper advocates for a revised form of Jodi Dean’s reflective solidarity, which is based on mutual responsibility toward each other despite our differences. It is argued that in its current form this approach is a normative universal ideal which holds great potential but is unclear, underspecified and impractical. However, by injecting some “realism” into this theoretical approach, reflective solidarity is superior to affectional and conventional approaches.

Keywords: American Muslims, American society, ground zero mosque, racism, solidarity theory.

1. Introduction

This paper uses the controversy surrounding the building of an Islamic cultural center near ground zero in New York, also known as the “ground zero mosque”, to analyze the different forms of solidarity and their limits, and hopefully contribute to the development of a theoretical framework of solidarity that is non-excluding and suitable for the plural societies we live in. The ground zero mosque controversy is an interesting case study in that it led to solidarity with Muslim-Americans from segments of American society as well as politicians, while at the same time enticed antagonism from others in a post-9/11 atmosphere. The debate essentially led to a division within American society on how the issue should be resolved. By examining the different forms of solidarity the paper will ask how more people could have been convinced to develop solidarity with those behind the Muslim Community Center.

The paper begins by briefly discussing the plight of Muslim-Americans in the post 9/11 world, highlighting why the case study under discussion is of importance. Subsequently, the theoretical framework of the paper is outlined by looking at the definitions of affectional, conventional and reflective solidarity as defined by Jodi Dean. The next section delves into the debate surrounding the proposed construction of an Islamic center in lower Manhattan. Finally, the paper will use the case study to analyze the strengths and limits of each of the three forms of solidarity.

2. Muslims in North America

Around one percent of the American population, equivalent to over three million people, are Muslim (Lipka, 2017), though some estimates put this number at over 6 million (Nimer, 2015). Moreover, about two-thirds of American Muslims are first generation immigrants and around one third of them are native

born. This number is set to increase significantly. The Pew Research Center (2011) estimates that by 2030, 44.9% of Muslims in the United States will be native born. Before discussing the controversy surrounding the construction of a “mosque at ground-zero” in New York it is useful to briefly outline the larger issue of the persecution of American Muslims following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

2.1. 9/11 and a new reality for Muslims living in North America

Statistics show that anti-Muslim incidents in the year after 9/11 rose by 800% compared to the 1995-1996 time period. This includes a 23-fold increase in the number of violent attacks on Muslims. This does not include the hundreds of attacks against Sikhs, Hindus, African-Americans and other minorities who were mistaken for Muslim or Arab. Moreover, countless numbers of American Muslims were harassed at airports, mistreated at the workplace, in the military and even in school. Also, according to the council on American-Islamic relations, U.S. government actions right after September 11, 2001 alone impacted more than 60,000 individuals (Nimer, 2002). These events highly affected the day-to-day lives of 3 to 6 million American Muslims. Moreover, these hate crimes have not subsided with the passage of time. For example in July 2017, the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) reported that after the election of Donald Trump, hate crimes against Muslims rose 91% in the first half of 2017 (Aljazeera, 2017).

Even in the more diverse and tolerant Canadian society, Muslims went under a national security spotlight. Security officials from organizations such as the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) and provincial and local police started to “visit” many Muslims. The Canadian Council on American-Islamic

Relation (CAIR-CAN) has conducted a national survey on this issue. The results of the 2004 survey show that 8% of the 467 respondents were questioned by security officials, with 46% of them reported feeling fearful, anxious or nervous, and 24% of them felt harassed and discriminated against. Many reported that the officers were aggressive and threatened them with arrest based on the Anti-Terrorism Act. Problematic questions were asked, such as their loyalty to Canada, their level of commitment to the Islamic faith and its rituals, as well as questions asking their opinion about the word *jihad* (Nimer, 2002: 2-3).

A 2004 survey of Muslims living in North America indicated that 56% of respondents reported anti-Muslim incidents at least on one occasion in the year after 9/11. Thirty-three percent of these anti-Muslim incidents were verbal abuse; other highly reported experiences included racial profiling; and 16 percent included workplace discrimination. Also 56% of respondents indicated that they felt media reporting on Islam and Muslims had become increasingly biased (Nimer, 2002: 6).

The increase in prejudice against Muslims after 9/11 intensified the pressure on them to assimilate into the dominant practices of society (Spurles, 2003: 44). For example, some Muslim girls felt that they could not assimilate into mainstream culture by performing some Islamic religious acts, and as a result some Islamic practices such as wearing the hijab, which is one of the most salient markers of being a Muslim woman in the public, eventually faded among some members of the Muslim community. This pressure was more acute for Muslim women who experienced discrimination in the public.

Even though virtually the entire American Muslim population strongly and publicly condemned the terrorist attacks (Pew Research Center, 2011) and even though none of the hijackers was an American Muslim, a majority of the American

population was not in solidarity with their fellow citizens, whose only difference was that they ascribed to a different religion. Even ten years after the attacks a Gallup report indicated that "a significant number of Americans of diverse faiths report distrust of and prejudice toward U.S. Muslims, more so than toward any other major faith group studied" (Johnson, 2011). Such prejudice is largely the result of a systemic construction of Islam and Muslims as the ultimate "other" in American society, particularly after the fall of the Soviet Union and the elimination of communism and communists as "others."

2.2. American Muslims as "others"

Muslim Americans come from very diverse backgrounds and ethnicities. Also, the life styles of Muslim Americans look very similar to the rest of the American public. For example, statistics show that they watch entertainment television, follow professional or college sports, recycle household materials, and play video games comparable to the general public. Moreover surveys show that virtually all Muslim Americans agree that women should be able to work outside of the home and most of them also think that there is no difference between male and female political leaders (Pew Research Center, 2011). These facts however have not stopped the stereotypical representation of Muslims in the US.

In *Orientalism*, Said (1978) argues that Western knowledge about the East is not generated from reality but rather from preconceived stereotypes that envision all "Eastern" societies as fundamentally similar to one another, and fundamentally different to "Western" societies. In this discourse Western society is portrayed as developed, rational, flexible, and superior, while the East, particularly the Middle East, is seen as eccentric, sensual, and backward. In Orientalist discourse the actions and values of the Orient are presented as the ultimate

"other" of Western actions and values. "That's the power of the discourse of Orientalism," Said explains. "If you're thinking about people and Islam, and about that part of the world, those are the words you constantly have to use. To think past it, to go beyond it, not to use it, is virtually impossible, because there is no knowledge that isn't codified in this way about that part of the world" (Said, 1978).

According to Said (1978) orientalism exist in most media and academic descriptions and analysis of the Middle East. One example of this are the findings of Dr. Jack Shaheen (2009), a professor emeritus of mass communication at Southern Illinois University, who in "reel bad Arabs" analyzes over 1,000 Hollywood films and discusses how they corrupt and manipulate the image of Arabs. Shaheen (2009) argues that the misrepresentation of Arabs in American filmmaking has existed since the early days of silent cinema and is present in the biggest Hollywood blockbusters today. His research show how Arab men are characterized as bandits, savages and nomadic while Arab women are presented as shallow and naïve belly dancers serving evil and greedy Arab sheiks. Most important is the image of the Arab as "terrorist." Interestingly enough such characterization took place long before the terrorist attacks of 9/11.

Although 9/11 intensified the demonization and misrepresentation of Muslims, the stereotyping of Muslims, especially Muslim women, started many years before the terrorist attacks. In fact one of the justifications used in the service of colonialism was that Muslim women were being oppressed and they were in desperate need of our help and "saving" (Shaheen, 2009: 123-140). Many Western feminists continued this narrative in subsequent years. They portrayed Muslim women as being oppressed by the men in their community, and that we as intellectuals had a duty to go and

save them. The tool used for this “saving” was Western secular tradition which they argued was protective of women’s rights and was superior to Eastern religious traditions (Nagra, 2011). The notion of “saving” Muslim women was even invoked in the justification of the War on Terror and the invasion of Iraq (Rutherford, 2004: 23-39).

3. Theoretical framework

Jodi Dean (1995), a professor of political science at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, introduced the concept of “Reflective Solidarity” in a 1995 article in the “Constellations” journal. Reflective solidarity is based on mutual responsibility toward each other despite our differences. Reflective solidarity seeks to eliminate the boundaries between “us” and “them” by embracing and acknowledging difference. Dean (1995) argues that Reflective solidarity is the only form of solidarity suitable for the plural societies we are living in today, where traditional values have lost their meaning and force, and where immigration has further diversified the community.

Before fully introducing the concept of reflective solidarity, Dean (1995) explains how earlier forms of solidarity, specifically affectional and conventional solidarity, are of limited effectiveness. Affectional solidarity is solidarity that is primarily based on the intimate relationships of love and friendship. As such affectional solidarity is reliant on emotional attachments, which lead to care and concern toward other human beings. For example feminist “care theorists” call for affectional solidarity by arguing that family relations such as a women’s capacity to bear children or the nurturing qualities of mothering can be used as a basis for coming up with an ethics that can be applied to others. These theorists are essentially arguing that “if you want a relationship with the other, care for her.” Dean (1995: 116) argues that the concept of “caring” is

very ambiguous in these theories and furthermore they are unable to “help us in those instances when we have no desire for a relationship with the other.”

Conventional solidarity on the other hand is based on common interests and concerns that are established through shared traditions and values. Conventional solidarity is based on the “we-ness” of groups and is used to unite a group or community toward a common struggle or goal. Dean criticizes this form of solidarity by arguing that it reinforces in-group homogeneity and stifles criticism of instances of oppression within the group. Dean uses the example of conventional black solidarity to show that this form of solidarity, by failing to criticize the rigid norms it is based on, ultimately results in its own demise.

Contrary to affectional and conventional solidarity which strengthen the borders between “us” and “them,” reflective solidarity problematizes and eliminates such borders. Dean argues that reflective solidarity achieves this by “viewing the ‘we’ as constituted through the communicative efforts of ‘I’s’, reflective solidarity changes the boundaries of community, the demarcation between ‘us’ and ‘them,’” as a result of which the other is considered a member despite her difference. This uniting of “I’s” takes place as a result of communication, dialogue and the use of language, concepts developed by Habermas (1984: 252-393). Such communication allows the reciprocal recognition of each other despite our differences and this is why reflective solidarity is very appropriate for the plural and individualistic societies of today (Dean, 1995: 123-130).

4. The ground zero mosque controversy

“Ground Zero Mosque” is the term used to describe the controversy surrounding the planned construction of a thirteen story Islamic community center at Park Place in lower

Manhattan at a site that is currently a Muslim area of worship. The proposed center which is also referred to as Park 51 and Cordoba House would be located two blocks away from ground zero and would include a large auditorium, a prayer area, a theater, a performing arts center, an art studio, a fitness center and gym, a swimming pool, a basketball court, a childcare center, a food court and even a culinary school. Moreover the project’s sponsors indicated that it would be a multi-faith center and would be open to the general public. Also the center would include a memorial for the victims of 9/11 (Jackson & Hutchinson, 2010).

In May 2010, when the local board was reviewing the proposed construction plan, a controversy erupted regarding the construction of the “ground zero mosque,” even though many supportive commentators explained that it was neither a mosque nor at ground zero. A *Huffington Post* article by Hossain (2010) for example criticized the use of the name “Ground Zero mosque”, and explained that it is "not a mosque but an Islamic Community Center" and Marbella (2010) wrote in *The Baltimore Sun* that the building was closer to a YMCA center than a house of worship. Moreover, according to Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, the chief proponent of the center and its future manager, who according to the economist is “a well-meaning American cleric who has spent years trying to promote interfaith understanding,” the project was modeled after the Jewish community center in New York's 92nd Street that reaches out to other religions (*The Economist*, Aug 5th, 2010). After the controversy erupted Abdul Rauf indicated in a September 8, 2010 interview: “If I knew that this would happen, that this would cause this kind of pain, I wouldn’t have done it. My life has been devoted to peacemaking” (Barnard, 2010).

Critics on the other hand argued that the center would be an insult to the memory of the 9/11 victims, since the attackers

were after all “Islamic terrorists.” Moreover, the construction of the center would be insensitive to the families of the survivors. Some critics even called the proposed building as a “victory mosque” for Islam built on the tenth anniversary of their “successful attack on America” (Geller, 2010). Sarah Palin called on “peaceful Muslims” to “repudiate” the “ground-zero mosque” because it would “stab” American hearts in a twitter message (Condon, 2010). In another twitter message she stated: “Peaceful New Yorkers, pls refute the Ground Zero mosque plan if you believe catastrophic pain caused @ Twin Towers site is too raw, too real” (Wheaton, 2010). Another important figure opposing the construction project was Newt Gingrich, the former speaker of the House of Representatives. The Republican presidential candidate argued, “There should be no mosque near ground zero so long as there are no churches or synagogues in Saudi Arabia” (The Economist, 2010a). He also stated that the proposed construction “would be like putting a Nazi sign next to the Holocaust Museum” (Wyatt, 2010). Moreover, Gingrich argued that the title “Cordoba center”, named after a city in Spain, was a reminder of a period when Muslim conquerors ruled Spain and was thus a “deliberate insult” (The Economist, 2010b). Many other politicians including John McCain and Mitt Romney, and organizations such as the Southern Baptist Convention, the Zionist Organizations of America and the Tea Party officially opposed the project.

Proponents of the project on the other hand argued that the name Cordoba was chosen because the city was a historical example of the peaceful coexistence between Muslims, Christians and Jews and because the three religious groups had been able to establish a shared center of learning at Cordoba together (The Economist, 2010b). They also pointed out that the construction site had been a place of Muslim worship for many years and was only being rebuilt and upgraded, moreover Muslim religious facilities even existed in the World Trade

Center before the attacks (Freedman, 2010). Advocates of the project also indicated that many of the families of 9/11 victims were in solidarity with American Muslims and supported the construction of the center.

Many of the families of 9/11 victims were in fact very outspoken in their solidarity for the project. Kelley (2010), who lost her brother in the 9/11 attacks, wrote in an op-ed: “I believe this debate is more and more about religious intolerance, and less and less about sensitivities. ... The irony in the debate over the section of the building that would house a mosque is that one might assume that God (the same God to Jews-Christians-Muslims) would be pleased with any type of effort that involves prayer and service to others.” Keane (2010) whose husband Richard was killed on 9/11, wrote: “To punish a group of Americans who live in peace for the acts of a few is wrong. The worst atrocities in history found their base in fear of those who were different. We certainly should be able to learn from those hateful events, and in a country dedicated to diversity and acceptance, include the mosque in the heart of the world's melting pot.”

Although it should be pointed out that not all the families of 9/11 victims shared the above sentiment. Some families were openly opposed to the project and even held a protest at the proposed construction site. The “9/11 Families for a Safe & Strong America” called the proposal “a gross insult to the memory of those who were killed on that terrible day” (Jacoby, 2010). Some families also individually condemned the project. Dov Shefi, a former general in the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) who lost his son Haggai in the attacks, said in a radio interview “I think that the establishment of a mosque in this place, a place that serves as a memorial site for [thousands of] families, is like bringing a pig into the Holy Temple. ... It is inconceivable that in all the city of New York, this site was specifically chosen” (Israel Today, August 04, 2010).

In the end, primarily due to the pressures cited above, the mosque at ground zero was cancelled. Instead a 43-storey luxury condo high rise that includes an “Islamic cultural museum” is being built on the site and is expected to be completed in 2018 (Weiss, 2016; Carmiel, 2016). With the cancellation of the mosque, Breitbart News, the far-right news outlet run by Trump ally Steve Bannon declared: “The infamous Ground Zero Mosque project is officially dead. We won. We the People ... The Ground Zero Mosque project was a middle finger to the American people. There has never been a mosque of reconciliation and healing built on the site of a jihadi attack. Ever. It is, on the other hand, an Islamic pattern to build triumphal mosques on the cherished sites of conquered lands” (Geller, 2015).

5. Theoretical approaches to solidarity

The case of the ground zero mosque controversy is a good case study to analyze the three different types of solidarity Dean (1995) discusses.

Affectional solidarity was definitely used in some instances to drum up support for the project. For example, some of the 9/11 families in support of the project called for caring and kindness toward American Muslims, who were referred to as human beings and “innocent” of any crime. Nevertheless the presence of affectional solidarity which is based on feelings of caring, friendship and love was very limited in the debate and calls for solidarity based on such emotional feelings was very rarely mentioned and advocated by the people responsible for the project, media pundits, politicians and even ordinary Americans in support of the project. Indeed the case study exposes some of the limits of affectional solidarity. Since this form of solidarity is primarily based on emotions and feelings of attachment, it seems to be only applicable or at least effective in

cases where we have a direct tie or at least an acquaintance with the “other.” When there are no such ties and the other is just a stranger, it is difficult to imagine how feelings of caring and concerns can be established.

This issue becomes particularly problematic when solidarity wants to be established not with a local population, but with a group of people at the national or even international level. In such instances how can we create feelings of love and caring toward people one has never met and does not even understand? In the case under study, in which as explained earlier Muslim Americans had been systematically presented by the media and seen by ordinary Americans as cultural, religious and political others, how can we expect Americans to feel care and friendship toward them? This might be the primary reason why proponents of the project rarely advocated for such forms of solidarity.

On the other hand conventional solidarity which is based primarily on common interests and concerns that are established through shared traditions and values was the primary form of solidarity present in the ground zero mosque debate. In many instances of support for the project, media pundits and politicians based their solidarity on the traditions and values of the American political system. For example, an article in the Economist condemned Gingrich’s comments and called on him to “rejoin the modern world, before he does real harm” (The Economist, 2010a). The same article emphasizes that allowing the project to continue would allow Muslims to feel “accepted and at home” in a “nation of immigrants” and thus reduce terrorism. Moreover, the article reminds the reader about a deeply held value in America: “the separation of church and state” (The Economist, 2010a). Michael Bloomberg, the mayor of New York, supported the project because it “tells the world” that the U.S. has freedom of religion for everyone” (Rabinowitz, 2010). In a similar position when Minnesota Governor Jesse

Ventura who endorsed the project was told by a CNN anchor that most Americans did not want the center to be built, he replied: “people need to remember, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights should be written in stone. You cannot subject them to popularity. They are there to protect unpopular things, like the First Amendment” (Ventura, 2010).

More important of all Barak Obama stated: "Muslims have the same right to practice their religion as anyone else in this country. And that includes the right to build a place of worship and a community center on private property in lower Manhattan,” adding that “this is America, and our commitment to religious freedom must be unshakable” (Creed, 2010). When Obama came under fire from conservatives for the above statements he clarified: “I was not commenting and I will not comment on the wisdom of making the decision to put a mosque there, I was commenting very specifically on the right people have that dates back to our founding. That's what our country is about” (Fox News, 2010).

In essence such forms of conventional solidarity were based on the founding principles of the American Revolution, the ideas of its founding fathers and the constitution they drafted which guaranteed freedom of religion and the separation of church and state. Moreover at least a fragment of the American political landscape believes that as a country of immigrants they should be tolerant and even embracing of other cultures and religions. Moreover sentiments of solidarity based on such views were not just restricted to politicians and elites but were shared by the American public. For example, a poll of New York State residents found that 54% of participants believed that Muslims had the right to build the mosque “because of American freedom of religion” (Quinnipiac University, 2010). Another poll by Economist/ YouGov found that 50.2% of Americans believed that Muslims could build their mosque

based on a "constitutional right" (The Economist, 2010b). Also, the families of 9/11 victims in support of the project mostly used language that called on Americans to endorse the project because of American values and in order to "show the world" the type of country America is.

The conventional solidarity discussed above is based on a civic understanding of group membership, which argues that Muslim-Americans as citizens should enjoy the same rights and freedoms as other Americans. This form of solidarity is established on the understanding that Muslim Americans are part of "us", due to their citizenship, and therefore should be respected and even sympathized with. The main limit of this form of solidarity is that in many instances there are no firm criteria for how members of "us" should be determined. In the case under study in this paper, some opponents of the project opposed the construction precisely because they did not see the projects sponsors and the larger Muslim community as members of "us." Moreover, it can be argued that at least a segment of support behind the project, including that of President Obama, was not due to solidarity with American Muslim but rather to uphold deeply cherished ideals.

The main limit of conventional solidarity is that it uses membership within a group to advocate for solidarity. In many instances however, people in need of solidarity might fall outside of the boundaries of "we." In the case of the ground zero mosque for example some Americans were in solidarity with the Muslim community because they were considered as "Americans" based on their citizenship. Civic group membership based on citizenship however is not the only criteria used to decide whether someone is part of "us" or not, even in today's postmodern societies. Thus for example, some Americans would not consider Muslims as members of "us" because they weren't seen as white or Christian, and didn't share

the same values and traditions, therefore they weren't "really Americans." Moreover members of the group might see the group's goals, and thus the reasons cited for solidarity, differently. So for example while some supporters of the project explained that the planned construction would reduce terrorism and would "show the world" American diversity and tolerance, an editorial column in *The Wall Street Journal* asked: "Who is it, we can only wonder, that requires these proofs? What occasions these regular brayings on the need to show the world the United States is a free nation?" (Rabinowitz, 2010). Maybe this is why most polls reported that a majority of Americans opposed the construction of the Islamic center (Rasmussen Reports, 2010).

The limits of conventional solidarity become even more pronounced when we seek to establish transnational solidarity. If one cannot be in solidarity with Muslims within one's own community, many of whom were born and raised in the US, speak English, watch the same movies, listen to the same music, then it would be nearly impossible to have solidarity with people living in a distant land who might have a completely different culture, language, religion and background. Moreover, conventional solidarity, by emphasizing on common values and traditions, strengthens in-group cohesion and homogeneity while at the same and inadvertently accentuates the distinction with "others". In the case under study for example, conventional solidarity might create solidarity with American-Muslims, however it would solidify alienation with foreign people who cannot be considered "American" under any rubric and as a result would be dealt with a completely different set of rules. Another limit of conventional solidarity is the limited and determined principles it can be based on. Since conventional solidarity is based on in-group values and traditions, we should ask ourselves what if these values and traditions are wrong? This was of course not the case in the ground zero mosque

debate, but another example might make this point clear. How can a Saudi Arabian man be in solidarity, in its conventional form, with women in the country when the very values and traditions of that society are what is causing the oppression in the first place? Thus even if one sees these women as part of “us” they would still not be granted justice since the rules governing “us” are dictating their oppression to begin with. Being able to distinguish between right and wrong creates a moral dilemma with no clear path on how it can be solved. A first step however is to always question the traditions of one’s community.

Based on the above discussion of affectional and conventional solidarity in the ground zero mosque debate, it might be concluded that the case under study is an excellent example of where “reflective solidarity” should have been advocated and called for since contrary to the other two forms of solidarity which strengthen the borders between “us” and “them,” reflective solidarity problematizes and eliminates such borders and creates mutual responsibility and recognition without calling into question or trying to abolish our differences and plural ways of life. As the next section will point out however, while reflective solidarity seems to be a promising avenue for further research, as of yet it is unable to provide a viable alternative to affectional and conventional solidarity.

6. Concluding remark: The limits of reflective solidarity

Dean’s theory of reflective solidarity has been criticized for being too vague. Søren Juul for example asks what is meant by “a responsible orientation in social relations”? (the goal of reflective solidarity). Soren agrees with Dean that in the plural and individualized societies of today there is a need for an inclusive form of solidarity, however he argues that Dean’s solution is too vague and abstract to be useful. Soren asks:

“What makes it plausible that Dean’s communicatively constituted individuals will create social inclusion and societal integration? What does ‘a responsible orientation’ mean?” (Soren, 2002, quoted in Juul, 2010: 255).

Soren’s criticisms are well founded. Indeed Dean’s theory of reflective solidarity in its present form does not go much further than being a normative universal ideal which holds great potential and promise but is unclear and underspecified. More important than the clarity Soren asks for are questions of practicality. Thus, even if Dean clarifies what she means by a “responsible orientation” the more important question of “how do we achieve it?” still remains. To use the ground zero mosque debate as an example, how could a “reflective solidarity” been advocated and achieved? Would mere “communication,” which Dean calls for, create “mutual recognition and understanding”?

The issue of communication and dialogue based on Habermas’ thinking, which is the central component of reflective solidarity, points to a larger problem with Dean’s theory that Soren does not mention. Communication and dialogue can be a source of understanding, recognition and solidarity, however it can only achieve this when the parties communicating have an equal voice. In real life however there are severe power discrepancies between different human groups. A rich, white man in America cannot have an equal dialogue with a poor, voiceless woman in Afghanistan. Issues of language and cultural differences aside, which would create obstacles to effective communication, it would be naive to assume that different groups of human beings hold equal power in such a dialogue.

To use the ground zero mosque debate as an example, opponents of the project had the backing of powerful media outlets such as Fox News and The Wall Street Journal behind them. The only reason why we were able to hear the other side

of the story was because more liberal media organizations as well as politicians decided to support the project. Had politicians such as Obama and Bloomberg and media outlets such as the New York Times and the Economist decided to not support the project based on conventional solidarity and in-group norms, we would have probably not heard the plight of the Muslim-American community in the first place. In cases and issues where both of the main political parties in the US agree on an issue, there is little to no debate at all.

In the communication technology era we are living in, having a voice in the “dialogue”, whether it is about AIDS in Africa or the invasion of Iraq, require power and money. As such expecting that a platform of equal “communication” can automatically be provided is very idealistic. Thus Dean’s assertion that “communication provides the bridge between ‘I’s’ necessary for the internal designation of a ‘we,’” misses the fact that some of the “I’s” are more powerful than the rest of us and as a result get to chose the values and norms the “we” need to ascribe to. This does not mean that communication based on equality and recognition is a utopian ideal and thus useless, rather the above discussion is meant to point out the difficulties and the long road ahead in achieving it.

The issues regarding an open communication forum based on the ideas of Habermas become more acute when we consider the fact that the parties involved in a communication might have divergent interests. Dean assumes that participants in a communication will aim to be guided by nothing other than the force of the better argument. In reality however different groups of people might have divergent and even opposing interests. For example, the backdrop of the 2003 invasion of Iraq was that the country has the fourth largest oil reserves in the world, while the US is the biggest oil consumer in the world (the US consumes 50% more oil than the entire European Union) (Central

Intelligence Agency, 2013). Assuming that a “reflective solidarity” can be achieved primarily using communication and dialogue needs to take into account that the differences and conflicts between human groups is not always due to miscommunication and lack of dialogue, rather sometimes a group wants what another group has.

Another potential pitfall of any sort of Habermasian communication that solidarity theorists should look out for is that an open forum for dialogue should not lead to the imposition of one party’s values and norms on others. As noted earlier in such communications not all parties have equal power and say, as a result in many instances the viewpoints of the more powerful are imposed on weaker parties who have come to “accept” and “appreciate” the values and traditions of the former. In defense of Dean, this runs completely contrary to her theory of reflective solidarity, which seeks to celebrate and accept diversity and plurality, nevertheless it is wise to look at potential dangers if the theory is further developed. The example of critical IR theory demonstrates this.

Critical IR theory seeks to problematize the current world order and establish a more “equal” world society, yet some of its major theorists such as Andrew Linklater who argue in favor of a Habermasian open dialogue to reorder society have already taken a Eurocentric stance. Linklater for example has argued that the West has actually reached a higher stage of “moral development” than other cultures because it was more “open to learn from others” (Moore and Farrands, 2010: 153-155). As a result of such views, Linklater and other critical theorists have even gone as far as to argue in favor of military “humanitarian intervention” by Western countries. The problem with the above Habermasian form of communication is that these theorists have already decided the outcome of the “dialogue” in their own favor before such a dialogue has even begun. As a result, such

attempts at universal communication to achieve equality have reaffirmed the very boundaries of exclusion and inclusion that they seek to eliminate

The point of the above discussion is not to dismiss Dean’s reflective solidarity theory, rather it’s an attempt to inject some “realism” into a theory that seems to be very idealistic. Rather than having a misplaced faith in the supposedly transcendental human capacities for freedom and reason in a communication forum, we should consider the power relations and selfish interest that are present in any form of “dialogue.” By accounting for such darker aspects of human motivation and behavior we can further develop “reflective solidarity” into a theory that is both practical and more useful in the goals of achieving justice, equality and solidarity for human society.

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