David A. Hollinger

From identity to solidarity

Just who belongs together with whom, and for what purposes, and on what authority? Where and why do the claims of descent, religion, nationality, economic position, ideology, gender, and 'civilization' trump one another in the competition for the loyalties of individuals in an epoch of increased global integration? How much do we owe to 'our own kind' – whatever that may mean – and how much to 'strangers,' to the rest of humankind? Our most discerning social observers often conclude that "the boundaries of responsibility are increasingly contested."[1]

The problem of solidarity is shaping up as the problem of the twenty-first century. Yet the centrality of this problem to our time, and to our apparent future, is often obscured by the popularity of the term *identity*.[2] This word sounds like a reference to a stable, if not static, condition, largely cultural and psychological, but the word as commonly used in the United States during the past several decades has actually functioned to assign political and social roles to individuals and to flag expectations about just who will make common cause with whom. To share an identity with other people is to feel in solidarity with them: we owe them something special, and we believe we can count on them in ways that we cannot count on the rest of the population. To come to grips with one's true identity is to ground, on a presump-

David A. Hollinger, a Fellow of the American Academy since 1997, is Preston Hotchkis Professor of American History at the University of California, Berkeley. He is the editor of a volume recently published under the auspices of the Academy, "The Humanities and the Dynamics of Inclusion since World War II" (2006). His "Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism" was just republished in an expanded Tenth Anniversary Edition (2006). He is also the coeditor of "Reappraising Oppenheimer" (with Cathryn Carson, 2005).

1 Samuel Scheffler, *Boundaries and Allegiances: Problems of Justice and Responsibility in Liberal Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 65.

2 For a highly informative comparative account of how the notion of 'identity' is currently understood and employed in a variety of nations around the world, see Nadia Tazi, ed., *Keywords: Identity* (New York: The Other Press, 2004). The classic study of the history of this idea in the United States down to about 1980 is Philip Gleason, "Identifying Identity: A Semantic History," *Journal of American History* LXIX (1983): 910 – 931.

tively primordial basis, vital connections to other people beyond the family.

What exactly do I mean by 'solidarity,' and why do I characterize it as a *problem*? How does this problem relate to "the problem of the color line," which W. E. B. Du Bois a century ago called "the problem of the twentieth century"? How has the notion of identity delayed a fuller recognition of the urgency and scope of the problem of solidarity? This essay addresses those questions.[3]

Solidarity is an experience of willed affiliation. Some might prefer to speak of 'community,' but this usage blurs more than it clarifies. This word often serves simply to classify people, to denote a group defined by one or more characteristics shared by its members – whether or not those members are disposed to act together. Hence we speak of 'the real-estate community,' 'the gay community,' 'the Asian American community,' 'the scientific community,' 'the national community,' 'the Upper West Side community,' 'the manufacturing community,' 'the golfing community,' and so on, to indicate what may be an organized interest group or nothing more than a collectivity of individuals who share a distinguishing trait, practice, or place of residence.[4]

'Solidarity' best serves us if we use it to denote a state of social existence more specific than what 'community' has come to mean. Solidarity entails a greater degree of conscious commitment, achieved only when parties to an affiliation exercise at least *some* measure of agency, if only in consciously affirming an affiliation into which they were born. The experience of solidarity is more active than mere membership in a community. When the word 'solidarity' entered the English language in the middle of the nineteenth century, it was understood to refer to a property that some communities possessed and others did not. The English word 'community,' denoting a body of individuals, dates back many more centuries.[5] Solidarity is more performative than is community. Solidarity implies a special claim, even if modest in dimensions, that individuals have on each other's energies, compassion, and resources.

What is at semantic issue can be illuminated when we consider the popular notion of a 'community of fate.' This term commonly refers to a collectivity whose members have been subject to a single set of historical constraints. Jews are often described as a community of fate. Many Jews also affiliate with one another, affirm Jewish identity, and help

3 Portions of this essay are drawn from the preface to a book being published simultaneously, David A. Hollinger, *Cosmopolitanism and Solidarity* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006).

4 For a characteristic example, see http://groups.msn.com/stampcollectingcommunity, which is a website for 'the stamp collecting community.' For another, illustrating the practice of the press to use the term 'global community' to refer simply to the opinions of a variety of heads of state, see the headline, "Global Community Slams Gaza Incursion," posted June 29, 2006 (an account of diplomatic reactions to military actions by Israel): http://www.worldnetdaily.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE_ID=50844.

5 The *Oxford English Dictionary*'s first entry for *solidarity* dates from the mid-nineteenth century; that for *community* as a body of people dates from the fourteenth century. Credit for the development of *solidarity* as a tool of social theory is generally given to Émile Durkheim. Its more frequent use in recent years in places where the less precise word, community, had often been employed owes much to the work of Richard Rorty, especially his *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

to constitute a vigorous and sustaining solidarity. But not all members of the Jewish community of fate demonstrate significant solidarity with other Jews. The same distinction can apply to black people in the United States, to other descent-defined groups, to women, and to any population group whose members have been treated in some special fashion by persons who have exercised power over them. A community of fate will often sustain a solidarity, but the problem of solidarity arises only when the role of 'fate' is supplemented by the action of forces other than those that created a given 'community of fate' to begin with.

Feminism is a solidarity, but womanhood is not. Judaism is a solidarity, but having a Jewish ancestor – even a Jewish mother, to allude to one of the classic criteria for being counted as a Jew – is not. The Chinese American community is a solidarity for many Americans of Chinese ancestry, but not every American of Chinese ancestry is equally invested in it and some may be altogether indifferent to it. We will miss the character and scope of the problem of solidarity if we conflate solidarity with the mere possession of a set of traits or antecedents or confinements. On the other hand, the problem of solidarity is real when there is at least some opportunity for choice, when people can exercise some influence over just what 'we' they help to constitute.

The problem of solidarity is thus at hand whenever people are capable of actually asking, who are 'we'? This 'we' question is not new, but it now arises with some urgency in an imposing range of settings. The 'we' question does not press itself upon individuals who are supremely confident about the groups to which they belong, and to which they are the most deeply committed. Such people know their basic 'identity,' even if only because they have been told repeatedly what it is. They may never have had cause to question it, and may never have been allowed any choice in the matter. Uncontested ascription has always been a powerful adhesive, and still is. But for millions in many parts of the globe today, a multitude of events, some world-historical in scope, has challenged this confidence.

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Prominent among the events that enable us to recognize the problem of solidarity is the accelerating integration of the global capitalist economy and its accompanying communications systems. New affiliations are created, while old ones are dissolved. "All that is solid melts into air," Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels observed even of the capitalism of their era. Capitalism has its own sources of stability, but capitalism has little respect for any affiliations that it cannot turn to its own purposes. Demographic migration, often attendant upon the dynamics of the world capitalist economy, is another major phenomenon threatening inherited associations. The movement of masses of people is nothing new, but now we see it in huge proportions, creating diasporas in the older industrial centers of Europe and North America, and creating sprawling megacities like Lagos and São Paolo, which our demographers tell us will be the chief social settings of population growth in the next half century. This physical mobility affects both migrants and the peoples into whose company they move: the migrants and their offspring may be divided between diasporic consciousness and new national or regional identities, while groups with a proprietary relation to a land and its institutions – such as the British and the Dutch and many other classically European peoples now coming to grips with

the reality of immigration – wonder if the newcomers alter the character of their 'we.'

As the example of Europeans uncertain about immigration illustrates, staying at home is not necessarily an escape from the problem of solidarity. Other disruptive events can come to you, even if you do not stir. Regime changes and the decline of empires, as well as immigration, can prompt the 'we' question for people who stay put. A host of post-Soviet states in Central Asia and Eastern Europe affirm their own peoplehood against the Soviet identity of the recent past. Ethnic Russians in the Baltic states and elsewhere in once-Soviet lands find themselves outsiders. In Africa and Asia an even larger number of postimperial nations negotiate their state authority with a diversity of descent communities whose relations to one another were heavily structured by the European conquerors who drew the boundaries of the states now trying to maintain themselves. Meanwhile, in the uniquely conspicuous space of Western Europe, affiliation as 'European' now rivals Dutch, German, Italian, and other national identities to an extent unprecedented since the rise of the nation-state as the basic unit of political organization.

In the realm of learned discourse countless intellectuals explain ever and ever more earnestly that all population groups, even those once called 'races,' are historically contingent constructions. This truth is especially hard to evade in the United States, where marriage, cohabitation, and reproduction across 'racial' lines have increased rapidly. Of course, the invidious process of racializing the varieties of nonwhite Americans continues, yet never in the history of the Republic has this process been more energetically contested and never has the very concept of race been more persistently attacked. But well beyond the United States the fact of physical as well as cultural mixing confounds ascribed identities. This mixing prompts the 'we' question and leads many individuals, especially in democratic countries, to think – no doubt naively in many cases – that they can answer this question for themselves.

The point of alluding to these recent events is not to insist that the challenge these events generate is altogether unprecedented. Historians more confident than I of their own knowledge of the entire past of our species can quarrel about the uniqueness of our time if they wish. My point here is more modest: these recent events make it plausible to suppose that among the greatest issues of the twenty-first century is the problem of solidarity, the problem of willed affiliation.

I suggest this without doubting for an instant the enduring value for the twenty-first century of Du Bois's classic formulation: "The problem of the Twentieth Century," said Du Bois in 1903, "is the problem of the color-line." But the lines between colors are not as sharp today as they were a century ago, or even fifty years ago. When Du Bois died in Africa in 1963, marriage across the color line was still prohibited by law in most of the states with large black populations, and black Americans were still without the protections of the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act. The significance of color itself, moreover, is today more vigorously contested than at any time in memory, thanks in large part to twentieth-century men and women whose actions vindicated Du Bois's prophecy.

The more we come to see the color-coded 'races' as artifacts, as contingent results of human action rather than primordial causes of it, the more the color

line takes its place among other social distinctions that may or may not be the basis for the assigning or choosing of affiliations. To be sure, poetic license is implicit in any assertion that any single problem defines a century. I invoke and emulate Du Bois's prescient hyperbole only to convey what I take to be the range and depth of the problem of solidarity.

If Du Bois were with us today, he would probably be among the first to warn that it is easy to exaggerate the degree of choice opened up by the world-historical transformations to which I have alluded. The problem of solidarity is inevitably located within one or another set of historical constraints, including the way in which power is distributed in any particular social setting. Some people have much more authority over their own affiliations than others do, and color continues to play a major role in these determinations. The scholars who have reminded us of the decidedly artifactual status of even the population groups long considered primordial have also understood, for the most part, that artifacts can be deeply entrenched. Contingency does not imply easy rearrangement. Yet only when the sources of social cohesion are not absolutely fixed is solidarity worth talking about as a 'problem' rather than simply as a condition.

And in the absence of fixity, a tension develops that gives the problem of solidarity its social-psychological structure. The tension is between the needs for 1) a deep feeling of social belonging, enabling intimacy and promoting effective exchange, and 2) a broad alliance, enabling mutual defense and facilitating a greater range of social and cultural experience. This tension between the impulse for concentration (hold onto your familiar ground; stick with your own kind; consolidate the richness of your heritage) and the impulse for incorporation (expand your horizons; take on as much of the world as you can; try to locate the source of your dilemmas, however remote) is heightened as economic and communications systems allow ostensibly distant forces to impinge on one's 'home.'

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Global warming is a convenient example of a threat to everyone that is difficult to engage from the point of view of any solidarity smaller than the species. But any solidarity capacious enough to act effectively on problems located in a large arena is poorly suited to satisfy the human need for belonging. And any solidarity tight enough to serve the need for belonging cannot be expected to respond effectively to challenges common to a larger and more heterogeneous population. To be sure, one can have multiple affiliations, many 'we's,' some more capacious than others. That we all have multiple identities (national, ethnoracial, religious, sexual, geographical, ideological, professional, generational, etc.) and are capable of several solidarities is widely understood. But the energies and resources and affections of individuals are not infinite in supply. There are priorities to be set.

Hence the problem of solidarity has a political-economic structure as well as a social-psychological one. We can speak of a 'political economy of solidarity' because solidarity is a scarce commodity distributed by authority. Whether identity is understood as monolithic or multiple, enduring or contingent, it has a political economy that is all too often neglected by theorists who distinguish sharply between 'the politics of recognition' and 'the politics of distribution.' The former, which owes its popularity to Charles Taylor, is commonly thought to entail recognizing the psychocultural

claims of personhood and its sustaining intimacies, especially as entangled with an inheritance of neglect and mistreatment.[6] In contrast to this variety of politics is the more conventional kind, understood to be about the distribution of a society's commodities. But identity, when understood as performative, is also a commodity of sorts. On just whose affections, resources, and energies can one make a special claim, and who has a special claim on one's own supply? Central to the history of nationalism, after all, has been the use of state power to establish national 'identities,' understood as performative, and thus creating social cohesion on certain terms rather than others.

The example of nationalism can remind us of the role of state power in the political economy of solidarity. States commonly exercise great authority in persuading people that their chief 'identity' is with the nation, ostensibly represented by the state. But a state can also exercise great authority over subgroup affiliations through the systems of classification it adopts, often in the form of a census. The debates over the categories of the federal census of the United States offer a revealing window on the political economy of solidarity. Although religious affiliations are of great importance to many Americans, especially in the years since 9/11 heightened awareness of the significance of Muslim identity, the census does not count people by religion. Efforts to put religion in the census have been repeatedly rejected, most recently at the time of the 1960 census.[7] The primary categories for subgroup affiliation in the United States have always been, and remain, those of physically marked descent. Although the state's purpose in collecting information by race and ethnicity has changed over the decades, and is now keyed by antidiscrimination remedies, the census categories are popularly considered natural kinds rather than political artifacts, and thus powerfully affect the dynamics of affiliation. The most important 'identity groups,' then, are ethnoracial, and the authority by which individuals are assigned to these groups is supposedly their own when in fact it is not.

Individual respondents to the census are expected to identify themselves according to color-coded population groups. The de facto authority in the political economy of solidarity is thus physical characteristics, especially skin pigmentation and facial shape, even though the de jure authority is the will of the individual being classified. Officials in the United States are no longer comfortable with the formal and legal assigning of individuals to groups according to an official's assessment of an individual's physical characteristics. That would smack too much of the practices of the governments of Nazi Germany and pre-Mandela South Africa. So the United States allows individuals to identify themselves. But virtually every governmental and private agency that cares at all about ethnoracial classifications fully expects the individual to voluntarily choose the same identity that an official would ascribe to them on the basis of their physical appearance. The census asks the individual to register a decision

6 Charles Taylor et al., *Multiculturalism and "The Politics of Recognition"* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992).

7 For a fresh study of the volatile controversy of the late 1950s over the issue of adding religion to the census, see Kevin M. Schultz, "Religion as Identity in Postwar America: The Last Serious Attempt to Put a Question on Religion in the United States Census," *Journal of American History* XCIII (September 2006): 359–384.

someone else has already made about who they are.

The census is only one major flashpoint for the 'identity debates' of the United States of recent decades.[8] These debates have been largely driven by a concern to *distribute the energies that make solidarities*. Nationalists of various persuasions press the value of national solidarity, arguing that 'we Americans' are all in it together, and should invest more of our energies in the nation rather than in economically, religiously, or ethnoracially defined interests. Advocates of this or that 'identity group' hope, with good reason, that positive identification with one's community of descent is to transform that community into a solidarity capable of advancing the interests attributed to the community. The movement to create a single 'Latino' or 'Hispanic' identity/solidarity out of populations derived from migration sources as different as Mexico, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Argentina, and Spain is perhaps the most visible example at the present time. But the dynamic is also apparent in relation to groups defined by gender, sexual orientation, religion, locality, and other social circumstances. And in the white supremacist past of the United States, to identify as white was of course to be part of a solidarity of white people ready to join together to exercise power over nonwhites.

The masking of mere solidarity by the quasi-mystical notion of identity can promote the violence Amartya Sen laments in his recent, important book, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*.[9] To understand that identity is primarily about the down-to-earth process of affiliation is to demystify identity and to diminish the presumption that the dynamics of affiliation are programmed by descent as registered by physical characteristics. The more we recognize the historical contingency of the process of identity/solidarity formation, the more civic value we might attribute to open debates about it, and the more respect we might develop for individual volition in deciding what one's 'identity' is, which is to say, in deciding just where one 'belongs.' Today's most persistent defenders of 'identity politics' continue to argue that identities are largely unchosen – more discovered than manufactured. Identities "are visibly marked on the body itself," insists Linda Martin Alcoff, "guiding if not determining the way we perceive and judge others and are perceived and judged by them." In this view, the process of experiencing what Alcoff calls "identity as an epistemologically salient and ontologically real entity" – however complex that process may be – is still controlled by physical characteristics and the traditional responses, often prejudicial, that these characteristics have generated.[10]

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8 For critical discussions of census policy today, see the Winter 2005 issue of *Dædalus*, especially the essay by Kenneth Prewitt, "Racial Classifications in America: Where Do We Go From Here?" 5 – 17.

9 Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006).

10 Linda Martin Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 5. This ambitious theoretical treatise is weakened by Alcoff's determination to bring ethnoracial identities into a single frame of analysis with gender identities, whose connection to a physical binary creates somewhat different challenges for analysis than do identities related to the species-wide spectrum of blending colors and morphological traits. Alcoff's arguments could be translated into the vocabulary of solidarity, and thus construed as pleas for solidarities that can diminish the mis-

Alcoff and others who have tried to 'reclaim identity' from critics like Sen are no less eager than he for allegiances that will promote a more just and peaceful world, but for them 'identity' implicitly directs solidarity formation along decidedly predetermined lines, and resists the search for, and scrupulous assessment of, bases for belonging less rooted in blood and history.[11]

But the turn from identity to solidarity is manifest in a flurry of recent treatises. A formidable cohort of philosophers, sociologists, historians, and political scientists appreciate descent-defined affiliations not as natural consequences of human differences, but in their capacity as chosen and ultimately disposable instruments for political action and social support. The postethnic principle of "affiliation by revocable consent" encourages individuals to join forces with other people with whom they 'identify,' but to choose for themselves just how much of their energies they want to commit to this or that solidarity, including one founded on common ancestry.[12] Prominent in marking this new turn are recent, ambitious books by Kwame Anthony Appiah, Seyla Benhabib, Rogers Brubaker, Amy Gutmann, John Lie, and Rogers Smith.[13] A great virtue of all of these works is that each recognizes the need to confront the 'we' question in a world of increasingly global dynamics.

No single formula will apply in every situation where the allocation of energies amid a variety of overlapping and sometimes competing affiliations is at stake. The problem of solidarity has to be addressed differently depending on the specific constitutional and cultural circumstances in which it arises. Our historical situation obviously demands wide solidarities, but universalist projects neglect at their peril the demands for belonging and intimacy that fuel particularist movements. A determination to balance the wide and the narrow lies behind the prodigious flowering of programs and proposals recently advanced as 'cosmopolitan,' all of which can be construed as a family of responses to the problem of solidarity.[14] Many cosmopolitan initiatives warn against the premature jettisoning of the nation-state.

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treatment of people on account of their sex and color. But Alcoff herself returns repeatedly to the historic ordinance of physical characteristics, and thus sharply confines the domain within which identity/solidarity formation can be expected to take place.

11 See, for example, most of the contributions to Paula M. L. Moya and Michael R. Hames-Garcia, eds., *Reclaiming Identity: Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

12 I have developed this principle in *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2006).

13 Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005); Seyla Benhabib, *The Claims of Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002); Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity Without Groups* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004); Amy Gutmann, *Identity in Democracy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003); John Lie, *Modern Peoplehood* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004); Rogers M. Smith, *Stories of Peoplehood: The Politics and Morals of Political Membership* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

14 A convenient compendium of the initiatives recently offered in the name of cosmopolitanism is Steve Vertovec and Robin Cohen, eds., *Conceiving Cosmopolitanism: Theory, Context, and Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). For a vigorous, popular manifesto, see Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006).

In an epoch of increasing migration with attendant cultural diversification, there is much to be said for the secular, civic nation as a central solidarity, capable of ensuring at least basic human rights and welfare for members of demographically heterogeneous societies. Such a solidarity promises to mediate between the species and the varieties of humankind more creatively and concretely than do universalist and particularist programs. The examples of Canada, France, India, and the United States can remind us how extensive is the spectrum of possibilities for such national solidarities, ranging from the French reluctance to recognize affiliations smaller than the nation to India's refined system of subgroup recognition.

But my purpose here is not to pretend to have solved the problem of solidarity, only to register its profundity and ubiquity, and to suggest that our errors in dealing with it are more often on the particularist than on the universalist side. There are fewer and fewer places to hide from forces that operate in a global arena. "There's no hiding place down there," warned an old gospel song. Nor is there a hiding place 'up here.' If we do not take on as much of the world as we can, the world will come to us, and on terms over which we will have even less control than we do now.