

Robin Zheng
University of Glasgow

The People United: Solidarity and Difference on the Road to Social Change

draft from May 2023. please do not cite or circulate without permission.

Solidarity, the rallying cry of movements for transformative social change, is needed today more urgently than ever. Philosophers have conceived of solidarity variously as a kind of moral relationship that generates obligations amongst the members of a social group, political coalition, society, or all of humankind. But they have rarely focused on what makes it so vital for social movements: the fact that it is the only form of power available to the powerless. This book offers an account of *solidarity from below*, which explains how those who lack money, guns, or political influence can collectively confront injustice — and overcome it. Its key claim is that unlocking the power of solidarity requires a robust theory and practice of how solidary power is built, maintain, wielded, and repaired across intersectional differences. In sum, *The People United* demonstrates that our differences, which are so often used to divide, can also be a source of collective strength.

Chapter 1 (Introduction)

What We Have and What We're Up Against

This introductory chapter explains that the aim of the book is to develop an account of the nature of the collective power that I am calling “solidarity from below.” I frame this against the background of the basic problem of social change: how can the powerless masses overthrow the systems of domination that oppress and exploit them? I presents a two-part answer, both of which are as simple to state as they are difficult to theorize and practice. First, diverse oppressed groups must join together to exercise their collective power — a form of power that I call *solidarity from below*. Second, they must not let their differences split them apart — which requires an understanding of the *intersectionality* of their struggles. In short, intersectionality is the key to unlocking the power of solidarity.

The chapter further conceptualizes what it means to say that solidarity is a form of power, and situates the concept of “solidarity from below” within the existing philosophical literature on solidarity.

Chapter 2

Solidarity Is the Antidote to Fear

This chapter argues that the greatest barrier to building and maintaining solidarity is not difference, but fear. Solidarity from below requires working together with and hence putting trust in others, which in turn entails vulnerability. When the powerful employ their ‘divide and conquer’ strategy to undermine solidarity, it is not the sheer difference of the Other that leads to conflict. Rather, it is the recognition of conflicting short-term interests and the consequent fear of losing one’s advantages and becoming like the Other. The strongest antidote to this fear, I show, is direct experience of the collective power of solidarity from below, via participation in collective action. I further identify and explicate the key elements for successfully building power from

below: critique, vision, strategy, and inoculation. Inoculation against solidarity-undermining fear requires an understanding of how injustice works and how, as intersectional feminists have long argued, justice for one group or on one issue cannot be achieved without achieving justice for all others.

Chapter 3

Solidarity and Disagreement: Criticising Our Own

This chapter continues to examine how we can use our differences to build strength rather than weaken us through division, by examining the problem of internal disagreement and criticism. I argue that criticism, though unpleasant, is necessary and desirable by one's own lights, insofar as coming to understand mistakes is an integral part of the processes of social change to which one is committed. I draw on Lukas Slothuus's (2021) concept of "comradely critique" to explain how parties can reciprocally cultivate trust in one other's fundamental commitment to the same overarching mission, but I argue further that they must also be always clear on their differences. In particular, they must stay conscious of whether these constitute non-negotiable commitments vs. reasonable disagreement. Finally, the chapter explores cases in which solidarity breaks down over differences in identity and strategy, and offers guidance on repairing it drawn from the structured conversations used in therapeutic and mediation contexts.

Chapter 4

Solidaristic Pluralism: A Strategy for Change

How do we use the power of solidarity to actually effect social transformation? This chapter introduces a model of *solidaristic pluralism* for the (meta-)movement of movements for social change, viewed as a whole from the vertical perspective. I discuss a number of strategies for social change — ruptural, interstitial, and symbiotic — but argue against trying to pick a single strategy and gathering all our forces behind it. Instead, solidaristic pluralism embraces a variety of strategies and tactics in accordance with a model of "walking side by side in conversation," where communication is governed by the principles of good faith and common ground.

Chapter 5

The End of the Road

The concluding chapter closes with some reflections on how to conceive of solidarity from below if/when it succeeds in bringing about transformative social change. I sketch out a theory of human nature to ground my argument that though the immediate problem of overcoming injustice would (by definition) no longer be present in a genuinely just society, there is nevertheless a permanent need for maintaining the collective power of the people. In diverse, pluralistic societies, the threat of emergent oppressions must be countered with the vigilance, healthy disagreements, and appreciation of difference that characterize solidarity from below.