

Feminist solidarities: Theoretical and practical complexities

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This article considers the resurgence of interest in feminist solidarity in theory and practice in the contemporary moment in the United States and UK. What does feminist solidarity mean, what forms is it taking, and how might it proliferate? We begin by mapping the changing inflections of solidarity in recent feminist cultural theory, highlighting the range of theoretical components, investments and emphases. Next, we consider the various forms of solidarity presented and created by the Women's March and the Women's Strike, analysing the differences in terms of the extent of their reach and their political economy. We argue that both phenomena can be understood as reactions to, firstly, several decades of neoliberal impoverishment, which have now exposed neoliberal iterations of feminism as fundamentally inadequate; and secondly, and relatedly, the arrival of misogynistic and reactionary forms of nationalism. Finally, we show that different approaches to feminist solidarity, as well as an expansion of alliances, are necessary in order to extend contemporary feminism as an effective and large-scale project. We therefore argue that feminist solidarity needs to retain its genealogical roots in left politics whilst being as plural as possible in practice.

KEYWORDS

feminism, neoliberalism, solidarity, Women's March, Women's Strike

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1 | INTRODUCTION

On 15 July 2019, four US Congresswomen, Ilham Omar, Ayanna Pressley, Rashida Tlaib and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, held a joint press conference condemning President Trump's most recent tweets, which had claimed that the female politicians were 'left-wing extremists' and encouraged them to 'go home'. In their live appearance, the women – three of whom were born in the United States, one who is a naturalized citizen and all of whom are women of colour – thanked the many people who had expressed their support in the wake of these vicious attacks. Representative Ayanna Pressley, the first to speak, stated that, 'we are grateful for your solidarity, your encouragement and your support in the face of the most recent xenophobic, bigoted remarks from the occupant of our White House'.¹

In many ways, this was an unprecedented press conference, and one that can only be understood in the context of an increasingly divisive political landscape in the United States, Europe and across the globe, where ultra-nationalist parties have gained ground and where progressive politicians – and particularly women – are increasingly being targeted and attacked. Trump's Twitter assault on these Congresswomen is just one example of the kind of hate-filled vitriol that has become commonplace in political discourse over the last few years. Given this reality, it is perhaps not surprising that the notion of solidarity, which has a long history in and association with progressive and oppositional movements, is today a key term for left-leaning public figures and activists. As Pressley's statement highlights, solidarity – and particularly solidarity among women – has become an important concept for countering the rising tide of right-wing nationalism with its shameless racism, sexism and xenophobia.

Whilst feminist solidarities clearly have many long histories, as we discuss below, since 2016 there has been a palpable resurgence of interest in solidarity as a prominent organizing principle in the Global North (Vachhani & Pullen, 2019). Most recently, solidarity has served as a cornerstone for two of the most visible contemporary mass and grassroots transnational feminist movements, The Women's March and The Global Women's Strike. On their website, for example, the coordinators for the UK Women's March call 'on people of all genders to march in London as part of an international day of action in solidarity'² with women-led marches across the globe. Similarly, the website for the Global Women's Strike USA declares that:

*In the spirit of that renewed radicalism, solidarity and internationalism, the International Women's Strike US continues to be a national organizing center by and for women who have been marginalized and silenced by decades of neoliberalism ...*³

These feminist platforms as well as others such as the Everyday Sexism Project, #MeToo and #TimesUP (Vachhani & Pullen, 2019) highlight the important galvanizing role that solidarity has played in current political mobilizations.

But what is feminist solidarity? Solidarity invoked in a feminist context is often thought to cut across different identity categories – such as race, class, sexuality or nation – without assuming sameness among women or falling back into gender essentialism. To express solidarity with others is ostensibly to recognize and respect differences without colonizing those differences. Simultaneously, however, solidarity can appear to assume entrenched identity categories, thus risking the re-naturalization of these very same categories. When one stands in feminist solidarity, in other words, one often does so from a particular identity (and often identifying as a particular gender) in order to express support for the 'other' who is also defined by her identity. Such a framing is forcibly illustrated by the UK Global Women's Strike's self-identification as 'a strike for solidarity between women – women of colour, indigenous, working class, disabled, migrant, Muslim, lesbian, queer and trans women'.⁴ Consequently, at times there appears to be a constitutive tension within the theory and praxis of feminist solidarity: it promises to transcend difference while, in order to be politically operative, it reinforces difference by solidifying already existing categories of identity. Thus,

although it is often bandied about in political discourse as if its meaning were self-evident, solidarity turns out to be a complex and, at times, even paradoxical term.

In this article we explore the meanings of recent iterations of feminist solidarity in relation to both theory and practice. What does feminist solidarity mean, what forms is it taking, and how might it proliferate? To begin with, we sketch different understandings of solidarity in feminist theory in order to highlight its conceptual capaciousness and political potency as well as to interrogate why it continues to serve as a touchstone for many theorists and activists. In the mid-sections we explore some of the recent manifestations of feminist solidarity and their meanings, focusing specifically on the Women's Strike and the Women's Marches in the UK and the United States. This then takes us to a number of other key questions in the latter sections of the article: Why has this increased interest in and practice of feminist solidarity emerged in the current conjuncture? What can such an inquiry tell us about the political potential, as well as the limitations, of contemporary uses of solidarity as a concept and practice? And, finally, how can we facilitate the proliferation of feminist solidarity in the future?

2 | SOLIDARITY IN FEMINIST THEORY

In the wake of black and postcolonial critiques of the white western-centric tendencies of feminist scholarship in the 1970s in particular, solidarity coalesced as a key term for feminist theorizing in the Anglo-American world. By the mid-1980s, bell hooks (1986) had famously articulated her conception of solidarity among women, one that would acknowledge differences and even conflict across formations of race, class and sexuality but that would also unite women through struggle and learning. hooks (1986) argued that only when women 'actively struggle in a truly supportive way to understand our differences, to change misguided, distorted perspectives, [can] we lay the foundation for the experience of political solidarity' (p. 138). Since hooks' influential articulation, a range of feminist thinkers have considered the value of the notion of solidarity, offering different conceptualizations for our current historical conjuncture.

Not surprisingly, feminist scholars have diverged on how they understand solidarity and its political potential. This is due less to the constitutive tension within the theory and praxis of solidarity mentioned above, since all of the theorists concur that solidarity is a crucial term for facilitating a feminist politics that takes difference into account. Rather, the divergence has more to do with the varying theoretical commitments of each theorist, and, just as importantly, we suggest, to the multiple significations that solidarity seems to encompass. The notion of solidarity predominantly acts to incorporate – concurrently – a particular affective orientation toward the other (namely, a kind of empathetic identification and support); a mode of communication, where one's very stance or utterance performs an act of recognition; a form of political alliance; and the reality or promise of support for some form of political action. Consequently, theorists have often emphasized different dimensions of solidarity in their conceptualizations.

Given that the notion of solidarity clearly attempts to describe a relationship to others, a number of feminist theorists have emphasized the affective aspect of solidarity – namely, a kind of ethical orientation and support for or emotional bond with the other. Sandra Bartky (2002), for instance, emphasizes the affective dimension of all intersubjective encounters, where feminist solidarity is conceived as the overcoming of bias and working actively to eliminate rather than share the other's misery. In this way, she stresses that solidarity is generated through what she terms 'feeling-with' the Other. More recently, queer feminist thinker Clare Hemmings has continued to excavate the affective dimension of solidarity. For Hemmings, like Bartky, this affective dimension is not based on a shared identity or on any presumption of knowing how the other feels but rather comes into being from an affective dissonance (between one's sense of self and the social possibilities for the self's expression and validation, between self-narration and social reality, when how one tells one's story about one's self is at odds with social expectations). This dissonance can then potentially lead to the desire for social transformation. Hemmings (2012) contends that:

affective dissonance is central to feminism and can be theorised as the basis of a connection to others and a desire for transformation not rooted in identity, yet thoroughly cognisant of power and privilege. (p. 154)

In this understanding, solidarity emerges out of an experience and feeling of uneasiness in relation to dominant norms and relations of power, which, ideally, leads to the desire for social change. Solidarity thus emerges in the wake of a certain embodied experience, alongside an affective orientation toward others and the world.

Other feminist theorists, such as Jodi Dean, have focused on the communicative rather than the affective aspect of solidarity, offering conceptions that build on the Habermasian theory of the public sphere and communicative action. Dean has developed the notion of 'reflective solidarity', which is based on her understanding of language and communication as the primary vehicles of social integration as well as the sites through which we establish relationships with others and create a common social space. Reflective solidarity, for Dean, occurs within this communicative process and emerges as subjects recognize difference through dialogic engagement with one another. The communicative context, where we speak, listen and respond to one another in language is understood to provide the conditions of possibility of solidarity. It is through dialogue and our ability to take on multiple perspectives – what Dean (1996) calls 'the situated, hypothetical third' – that creates the dynamic of a 'we' rather than an 'us versus them', building ties through an openness to difference, while allowing our communicative disagreements to provide the basis for connection (p. 34). Solidarity here emerges not as the result of a feeling-with or affective dissonance, then, but rather through ongoing discussions and arguments.

Dean's articulation of a reflexive solidarity has been taken up by a number of other feminist theorists. For instance, postcolonial feminist theorist Chandra Talpade Mohanty draws on Dean's notion of reflexive solidarity as a communicative process in which a 'we' is produced. Yet Mohanty (2003) emphasizes how reflective postcolonial feminist solidarity consists of women and their allies choosing to work, strike and fight together, while acknowledging, respecting and valuing difference. Indeed, Mohanty argues that solidarity cannot be assumed in advance but must be worked toward through mutuality, accountability and the recognition of *common interests* (p. 7). The importance of forging connection through an ongoing dialogic process and openness to difference in order to change power relations is emphasized. Solidarity is, here, not posited as a precondition for feminist struggle, as it seems to be for Bartky and Hemmings; but rather emerges 'in the doing': as part of either a dialogic process in the case of Dean, or, in the case of Mohanty, of 'struggling together'. There are, in other words, different temporalities to these understandings of when and how solidarity is produced and reproduced.

For Amy Allen as well, solidarity is the result of *action*, conceived as a kind of collective power generated through struggle, arising from acting-in-concert in order to attain certain political goals. Invoking Hannah Arendt, she writes that:

we can view solidarity as the collective power that grows out of action in concert, binds members of the feminist movement together, and enables feminists to build coalitions with other oppositional social movements. (Allen, 1999, p. 109)

Allen thus insists that solidarity is produced neither through shared identities nor affective dissonance, but rather through collective action that combines commitment to particular goals and political action.

More recently, Shirin Rai has combined the notion of reflexivity with political action, arguing that solidarity is informed by a horizontal relationship among those whose vision of a good life coalesce around similar forms of politics. For her, like Dean and Mohanty, feminist solidarity is reflexive (Rai, 2018). Yet reflexivity for Rai is not about taking on the perspective of 'the third'. Rather, it is inextricably connected to solidarity's necessary and continuous commitment to and practice of illuminating relations of power within different discursive and institutional relations of domination, while maintaining a critical relation toward its own practice of opposing oppressive structures. Furthermore, Rai's reflexive solidarity, again like Mohanty's and Allen's, is brought about by standing with others in struggle and, in so doing, engendering concrete and specific forms of social and political support. Echoing bell hooks'

initial articulation quite closely, Rai's work similarly expands feminist solidarity's compass by moving beyond identity categories through her investigation of 'relations of power' and by insisting on the necessity that we all – and not just those who are privileged vis-à-vis dominant institutions and discourses – remain critical of our own practices.

As this brief overview underscores, contemporary feminist theory is rich in theories of solidarity and has drawn on a range of disciplinary sources to articulate them. Despite their different theoretical assumptions about subjecthood, power, politics and intersubjectivity, however, it seems fair to say that all of the theorists ultimately concur on the following points: that feminist solidarity describes some form of orientation toward the other; that this orientation is one that, to different degrees, recognizes difference; and that feminist solidarity actively attempts to facilitate gender relations that are more just and which always include reducing women's oppression. It is also useful to note that given that the word 'solidarity' also has its roots in socialist politics of the 19th century, it strongly connotes left politics, mutuality and interdependence, and the equitable sharing of resources (Featherstone, 2012; Gilbert, 2018; Rowbotham, 1973). 'Feminist solidarity' usually carries some of these left connotations as well; and as left feminists, we argue that it needs to.

We offer this brief tour of theoretical literature to indicate the sheer *range* of interpretations of feminist solidarity. Clearly, there is no unitary consensus about the term. The nature of the logic of competitive individualism, in academia as well as in contemporary life, might encourage us towards an interpretation of which is 'the best'. But we argue that a more fruitful – and indeed solidaristic – approach is to use these texts as resources indicating different dimensions of feminist solidarity. Reading them next to each other can also help highlight key themes and facets of feminist solidarity which are often more latent in the literature, including, for instance, what we might term 'the temporality of feminist solidarity': some emphasize that solidarity is constituted *before* acting-in-concert, and others emphasize that it is constituted *through* the action itself. There are also different emphases on whether a particular affective relation or orientation toward the other is the *precondition* or the *consequence* of praxis.

Notably, then, it is the very capacious and even overdetermined nature of the term alongside its demonstrated political potency for counter-hegemonic and oppositional mobilizations and that has led many feminist theorists to claim its usefulness for progressive *feminist* politics. Feminist activists and organizers, in their turn, have recognized that solidarity as a concept has political potency and that it is crucial for mass mobilization, particularly today. Thus, in the next section we turn to look at how solidarity has been mobilized recently in practice, drawing on the theory we have outlined above in the process.

Before we do so it is worth summarizing our theoretical findings to highlight the different elements of feminist solidarity that we think are important to foreground as a tool for both analysis and praxis. We suggest that particularly useful components of theories of feminist solidarity can be disaggregated and identified as follows. First, feminist solidarity involves facilitating gender relations that are more just, and which always include reducing women's oppression. Second, it also involves some form of orientation toward the other which, to different degrees, recognizes difference. Third, feminist solidarity incorporates the critical dimension of common interests and mutuality. Fourth, the creation of feminist solidarity can have various temporalities: it can be constituted before, during or after 'action'. And, finally, feminist solidarity will by necessity involve reflexivity and agnostic argument and will always take place in a particular social and historical context. In the following sections, we explore how these key themes played out in the examples of the Women's Strike and Women's March.

3 | THE WOMEN'S MARCH

The Women's March on 19 January 2017 became the largest single-day protest in modern US history. This mass mobilization was a reaction to Donald Trump's election and his now infamous sexist and misogynistic pronouncements and behaviour. A variety of plans for marching on Washington, in the form of Facebook events – some secret, some not – had been created separately by a number of people, including Theresa Shook (a white retired lawyer from Hawaii, often positioned as 'the founder'), Breanne Butler, Evie Harman and Bob Bland. However, as thousands

of people signed up to these different plans to march over a short space of time, the events were merged into 'The Women's March' (Koh, 2016).

Such an act of collaboration and sharing between people and projects in order to attain certain political goals is, according to Amy Allen's definition, precisely how solidarity is generated. Moreover, this was also how the events were perceived by the media, whose framing often emphasized solidarity as a key feature of the march/es, both singular and plural, as plans for other Women's Marches emerged in other countries.

In *The Guardian* newspaper in the UK, where marches occurred in 15 cities, with an estimated 80,000–100,000 people marching in London alone, Nadia (Khomami, 2018) wrote:

Up to 2 million people have gathered in cities around the world as part of an international day of action in solidarity with the Women's March on Washington after Friday's inauguration of Donald Trump as the 45th president of the United States.

The marches in countries outside the United States indicate the extent of the global reaction to the fact that a person with a well-established track record of sexist treatment of women and shameless misogynistic views was now in a position of such immense global influence, particularly given the powerful position of the United States in relation to other countries. At the same time, and even as the Women's Marches worldwide demonstrated the galvanizing and transnational force of the notion of solidarity, the international marches also manifested the specificity of their locality, or the different character of the gender regimes within specific countries, mobilizing against child marriage in Malawi and street safety in India (Cochrane, 2017).

The address of the Women's March USA not only employed the notion of solidarity as part of its attempt to transcend differences among women, but the March's platform was, from the onset, explicitly intersectional, calling for 'Black women, Indigenous women, poor women, immigrant women, disabled women, Muslim women, lesbian, queer and trans women' (WMW, 2016) to unite. It also used the language of 'women's rights as human rights' and 'equal rights' (Moss & Maddrell, 2017, p. 614) in order to build the broadest possible alliance among women and their allies. As the numbers prove, this simultaneously intersectional and expansive approach was powerful and effective, and it did indeed mobilize huge quantities of people out onto the streets. Fisher, Dow, and Ray's (2017) quantitative analysis of surveys of Women's March participants, for instance, argues that:

the large turnout at the Women's March, which organizers and others see as an indicator of success, is the direct result of the effective mobilization of various individuals and organizational constituencies that were motivated by intersectional issues.

Linda Sarsour, one of the organizers and former co-chair of the Women's March USA, describes her participation and excitement as follows:

An intersectional movement allows me to not have to prioritize which issues are more important and kind of split my activism, and allows me to care about many things all at the same time. And that's the only way we're going to win.

Yet whilst this emphasis on intersectionality has managed to create alliances and even solidarity – when understood, again, in Allen's terms 'as the collective power that grows out of action in concert ... and enables feminists to build coalitions with other oppositional social movements' – there have also been recurrent criticisms of the extent of the solidarity generated, particularly given the initial marginalization of BAME participants and organizers. In other words, for some the US Women's March's conception of intersectionality was insufficiently capacious and, as a consequence, so was the extent of its solidarity. Akwugo Emejulu (2018) highlights this core feature as a 'failure of feminist solidarity', pointing out that:

When the Women's March was first mooted, it was originally billed as a 'never before seen' million-woman march on Washington. Not only did this first proposal co-opt the language and action of one of the most iconic moments of the American Civil Rights Movement, it also ignored a more recent million-women's march. The Nation of Islam had already successfully organised – with great fanfare – Million Man and Million Woman Marches back in the 1990s. (p. 269)

Likewise, Emejulu points to the initial white middle-class nature of the organizers as well as the subsequent diversification of the organizing group. This early history is occluded in some accounts of the Women's March. What seems clear, however, is that while this mobilization was historic and did effectively create solidarity at least in part based on its intersectional approach, the initial organization can also be understood as not having performed the kind of reflexive solidarity that Rai discusses, which illuminates relations of power within different discursive and institutional relations of domination, while maintaining a critical relation to its own practice of opposing oppressive structures.

Importantly, the organizing committee did respond to criticisms about its lack of diversity, rapidly and self-consciously diversifying later that year. By 2019, just two years after the first march in January 2017, the four key organizers were a black woman (Tamika Mallory), a Muslim woman (Linda Sarsour), a white woman (Bob Bland) and a Latina woman (Carmen Perez). And yet, following the diversification of the organizing committee, new and arguably more publicly contentious issues emerged that have threatened to undermine the movement and its momentum in ways that the initial criticisms of exclusion did not. These antagonisms revolved around accusations of anti-Semitism, which were directed at Mallory for participating in an event where Louis Farrakhan from the Nation of Islam spoke, as well as at Sarsour and Bland for their ostensible association with and past praise for Farrakhan. Farrakhan himself has long been at the centre of controversy in the United States since his fiery rhetoric has often used blatantly anti-Semitic language and tropes. As a result of increasing public and internal pressure, in July 2019 all three women stepped down from the organizing board. Sarsour argued that this was politically motivated and she had been pressured to resign because of her support for the pro-Palestinian Boycott Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement, and that Mallory was subject to racism; and later both women wrote that they regretted not making their commitment to combating anti-Semitism clearer.

Both the power and the problematics of the Women's March can be understood, at least in part, in terms of the relationship between solidarity and intersectionality. The March and its ongoing momentum have been successful in part because of its attempt at inclusivity through its invocation of intersectionality and the extent to which it was able to cultivate solidarity – which we understand, as detailed above, precisely in its capaciousness, as an expression of common interests, affective orientation, political stance and collective action – across difference. On the other hand, the March has been problematic because of the insufficient reach of its solidarity, both in terms of its original exclusions, as Emejulu has already pointed out, and due to its problems in working through difference, instead forcing resignations. While the marginalization of women of colour was seemingly rectified through a positive process of diversification, the accusations of anti-Semitism were only 'resolved' through the purging of three women activists from the organizing committee. As well as pointing to ongoing problems of reflexive solidarity in the wider cultural context, this also indicates the ongoing difficulties of producing reflexive solidarity amongst the organizing group.

Furthermore, the Women's March was unable or ultimately unwilling to address the devastation wrought by financialized capitalism and neoliberalism head on. After all, its organizational horizon was around women's rights, equal rights and human rights. That its intersectionality was framed at times as politically neutral is illustrated by examples including how the London Women's March originally invited political representatives from all political parties, including UKIP, an extremely right-wing anti-immigrant party (Emejulu, 2018, p. 271); and, in the United States, the exclusion of abortion campaigns. Its attempts at an ostensible political inclusiveness alongside its liberal tendencies, which often emphasized recognition over redistribution claims, created a particular version of solidarity, one with a broad reach but seriously problematic horizons or solutions (i.e., curtailing women's right to choose and potentially endorsing a politics of anti-immigration and economic inequality). This pushes solidarity away from its heritage in the

commons and the left. By contrast, the Global Women's Strike has more often self-consciously adopted a rhetoric of solidarity which has been intersectional, internationalist and socialist in flavour.

4 | THE GLOBAL WOMEN'S STRIKE

Like the Women's March, the Global Women's Strike is an event which largely dates to 2017, taking place primarily in public space, as a march and a rally, and that has been repeated annually ever since. The Women's Strike encourages women to walk out of their workplaces, public and private, and to withdraw their labour in order to make palpable the extent to which women are simultaneously depended upon and exploited. On the Women's Strike UK website, for instance, it announces that 'The Women's Strike is about refusing all the work that women do – whether paid work in offices and factories, or unpaid domestic work in homes, communities and bedrooms.'⁵

The Women's Strike in the Global North has been much more self-consciously concerned with economic justice and with foregrounding the rights of the marginalized, including domestic workers and trans people. The US Women's Strike's website, for instance, highlights that the 'new international feminist movement is not simply about Trump and his misogynist policies but also against the conditions that produced Trump, namely the decades long economic inequality ...'⁶ Indeed, the Women's Strike has a much more explicitly socialist agenda in which economic justice and anti-imperialism as well as anti-racism appear with regularity. This can be seen clearly in how the announcement of the Women's Strike in the United States was made in the fashionable left online magazine *Viewpoint* by a number of 'big' left academic and activist feminist celebrity names, including Angela Davis, Nancy Fraser and Keeanga Yahmatta-Taylor (Davis et al., 2017).

The Women's Strike rejects the decades of economic inequality, criminalization and policing, racial and sexual violence, and endless global war and terrorism.

The Women's Strike is a strike for solidarity between women – women of colour, indigenous, working class, disabled, migrant, Muslim, lesbian, queer and trans women. On 8 March, in cities and towns across the UK we will meet each other on the streets and strike against a system of power that keep us isolated and divided from one another. (Verso, 2019)

Whilst both events mention similar intersectional groups and deploy the notion of solidarity, it is the Global Women's Strike's economic emphasis and analysis that most distinguishes the two. This difference in identity emerges not only from an examination of the two groups' platforms alongside their published material, websites, and public pronouncements by its organizing members and participants but also in the themes that each repeat, the dominant imagery each has disseminated, and the framing of the events by commentators and by the organizers themselves. Emejulu, for instance, counterposes the whiteness of the original Women's March with the F99 movement – Feminism for the 99% – which became the title of a 2019 book by Fraser, Arruzza, and Bhattacharya (Arruzza, Bhattacharya, & Fraser, 2019) which in turn popularized the movement. The Women's Strike is more closely connected to this constellation in ethos and people (we can note how the letter in *Viewpoint* was signed by Fraser et al.).

Whilst 'new' from 2017 in the Global North – just like the Women's March – the Women's Strike also has palpable transnational feminist connections and lineages. The Women's Strike was prompted in part by the October 2016 Polish women's nationwide strike 'Black Monday', against the right-wing Polish government's consideration of criminalizing abortion, and the #NiUnaMenos ('Not One Woman Less') protests against femicide, the killing of women, in Argentina, Mexico, Chile, El Salvador and Brazil. The UK branch clearly links its actions to other mass mobilizations across the globe organized by women. As its website states: 'From Argentina to Poland, from Ireland to Kurdistan, women are making connections, building alliances and taking action against our current conditions of womanhood.'⁷ In addition, the Women's Strike has self-consciously referenced lineages to historical women's strikes and to second-wave feminism, particularly social reproduction theory. This is evident, for example, in the striking

imagery produced, used and sold in the UK by the Women's Strike collective. One poster self-consciously deploys constructivist Soviet-style imagery, which is rendered very deliberately as multicultural, featuring three women with very different skin shades, and with a message updated for 21st-century geopolitics: 'The enemy does not arrive by boat, he arrives by limousine'.⁸ The enemy is the 1 per cent, the billionaire, not the desperate migrant. Some not dissimilar constructivist imagery was also adopted by new posters for the Green New Deal in the United States, which drew on public information posters from the New Deal era, and this use of left history is a continual feature.⁹

Other UK Women's Strike imagery has taken a different form, referencing the UK New Left, featuring and celebrating a well-circulated image of Stuart Hall looking after an infant in a creche during a 1960s feminist conference below the strapline 'the revolution starts with care'. The foregrounding of care and care work in large-scale social change is emblematic of feminist social reproduction theory, and of work that takes into account the unpaid labour sustaining social life and capitalist production (Bhattacharya, 2017; Care Collective, 2020). As we noted earlier, there are close ties between contemporary feminist theorists of social reproduction and the Global Women's Strike, including Nancy Fraser and Tithi Bhattacharya in the United States and Veronica Gago in Argentina.

The Women's Strike's interpretation of solidarity is therefore more attuned to the left political economy. In this respect one good example is Veronica Gago's theorization of feminist solidarity that emphasizes the need to take political economy into account alongside the necessity of coalition-building from the grassroots. Gago's (2020) 'eight theses on the feminist revolution' adopts a wide view, in which small-scale, minority movements interlink to 'take up the mass scale as a vector of radicalization within a composition that does not stop expanding' (p. 4). Gago's theory emphasizes the vectors of oppression which run between us, prioritizing 'a politics of the construction of proximity and alliances without ignoring the differences in intensity among conflicts'. Here Gago is explicitly using a notion of transversal politics — as discussed two decades earlier by feminist theorists including Cynthia Cockburn and Nira Yuval-Davis — which sought to avoid the twin perils of assimilation and essentialism for feminist political organizing (Yuval-Davis, 1999).¹⁰ For Gago, then, a conception of feminist solidarity is concerned with different interest groups connecting together to win both recognition and *redistribution* for all; it situates feminism as a project rather than an identity (Moran, 2014; Walby, 2011). Stressing the need to struggle against the ravages of predatory and extractive capitalism, Gago (2020) contends that making alliances without ignoring conflicts 'challenges the neoliberal machinery of minority recognition and the pacification of difference' (p. 4).

The Women's Strike, then, in many of its manifestations — and particularly in the United States, UK and Argentina — demonstrates what we might term a left and feminist understanding of political economy and social reproduction alongside intersectionality. This, we suggest, has led to a different sense and practice of solidarity — one that not only attempts to transcend different formations of gender, race and sexuality but one that self-consciously attempts to bridge struggles across the globe through its centring of economic inequality and the basing of its political mobilization around economic exploitation and oppression wrought by predatory neoliberal capitalism. It is notable that elsewhere — including in the Women's March — intersectionality can be mobilized to privilege categories of identity. Equally crucially, however, the *reach* of the Women's Strike in the UK and United States is far smaller than that of the Women's March. The Women's Strike does not engage with the mainstream in the same way as the Women's March. In the next section we consider how analyzing the current conjuncture helps us to understand why these forms of feminist solidarity have emerged, their particular character and the barriers, fluidities and the connections between them.

5 | CONTEXTS FOR A RESURGENT FEMINIST SOLIDARITY

The expansion of these forms and practices of feminist solidarity are not simply a reaction to the existence of Trump, with which we opened, although clearly that is part of the story. This resurgence is, we argue, a reaction to the wider, and widespread, effects of two key and interrelated larger contexts: firstly, authoritarian forms of neo-nationalism, characterized by aggressive misogyny, homophobia and an unapologetic resurgent patriarchy; and secondly, the

ongoing effects of several decades of neoliberalism and its compounded inequalities and gender regimes. In this concluding section we situate the Women's Strike and March in relation to these contexts and, using the theories of feminist solidarity from the first section, draw out the implications of what forms of solidarity are being used, and what more might be needed.

Both these recent manifestations of feminist solidarity are a reaction to the resurgent aggressive forms of patriarchy which have so often accompanied the mutation of neoliberalism into 'neoliberal nationalism' (Brown & Littler, 2018) or what Nancy Fraser (2019) has termed 'hyperreactionary neoliberalism'. As we know, these aggressive forms of right-wing nationalism have been marked by a broad-based assault on equal rights, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) rights, abortion rights and by a democratic deficit engendering a climate in which violent forms of misogyny can and do flourish (Farris & Rottenberg, 2017). Whilst this may be a sweeping characterization, it also captures key commonalities that countries from Poland and the United States to Brazil have recently experienced. As mentioned above, some of the largest and most significant of the multiple roots of the Women's Strike lay in the revolt against the Polish government's desire to recriminalize abortion, and the protests against femicide in Latin America, which has experienced a lurch to the political right in past years.¹¹ In the United States, the Women's March was prompted primarily by the election of a right-wing candidate who stood menacingly, wrestler-style, behind the female Democratic presidential candidate throughout the television debates, who has been accused of harassment by more than a dozen women, and whose recorded boast of 'grabbing women by the pussy' was widely publicized (Klein, 2017; Littler, 2019).

The resurgence of interest in feminist solidarity is, then, a resurgence of interest in the importance and indeed the recognized urgency of an intersectional approach and of acting in concert and working together at a time when women's and LGBT rights are under immediate threat from an increasingly powerful, and increasingly patriarchal, political right (Farris & Rottenberg, 2017; Ghigi & Rottenberg, 2019). The word 'solidarity' is, as we noted above, rooted in the work of the left and the labour movements. The increasing use – or at least visibility – of solidarity in these feminist mobilizations can therefore be understood to underscore the term's perceived political potency as well as the necessity of expanding its boundaries to facilitate alliances and coalitions that can address multiple axes of oppression. Indeed, the growing use of both the term and the notion of solidarity in feminist practice does, we suggest, demonstrate the need for a bolder left feminist response to the rise of right-wing nationalism, the increasingly violent assault on a range of hard-won liberal rights and the entrenchment of financialized neoliberal capitalism, which, among many other dire effects, has been decimating democratic institutions and processes in the Global North and elsewhere.

The increased mobilization of solidarity by feminist activists also, however, needs to be understood in relation to a long-term exacerbation of economic and social inequalities under four decades of neoliberalism (Dorling, 2019; Harvey, 2007; Klein, 2017). This political settlement, which has entailed not only an economic agenda of intensified privatization and deregulation but also the permeation of market metrics into more and more domains of our lives, has predominantly encouraged an individualized mode of feminism in which women are encouraged to compete with each other in order to rise up the social pile (Eisenstein, 2010; Fraser, 2013; Rottenberg, 2018). But as inequality has exacerbated, the gap between extremely wealthy women, such as Ivanka Trump, and those relegated to an underclass – and particularly those made homeless and exploited migrant labour – has become increasingly obvious and hard to avoid. Calls for mass protests based on feminist solidarity that include claims to both recognition and redistribution can therefore be understood as an important counter to other modes of individualizing feminism that disavow the socioeconomic and cultural structures shaping our lives.

Thus, the glaring effects of intensified inequality under neoliberalism has meant that more people have been speaking out, across a range of institutional sites, and in a range of different registers, about its gendered and racialized dimensions. The Women's Strike is one of these crucial feminist activist sites that have insisted on decrying financialized neoliberal capitalism; others include work by NGOs/in the third sector, such as reports by the Women's Budget Group on the disproportionate effects of austerity on women, and broadsides by cultural commentators such as Dawn Foster's book *Lean Out* (Foster, 2016; Women's Budget Group, 2020). In the same vein, academics working

across the social sciences and humanities have now produced an expansive, interconnected body of work picking apart the multifaceted workings of neoliberalism and the various ways it converges with feminist themes and produces neoliberal femininities. This includes work analysing neoliberalism's gendered social logic (McRobbie, 2020; Roberts, 2015) gendered cultural messaging (Gill & Kanai, 2019; Gill & Scharff, 2011), gendered workings in the third sector (Emejulu, 2016; Emejulu & Littler, 2019), gendered scapegoating of the poor and precarious (Jensen, 2018; Wilson & Chivers Yochim, 2017), gendered notions of empowerment (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Eisenstein, 2017; Gill & Orgad, 2017) and gendered dynamics in the neoliberal workplace (Adkins & Dever, 2015; Negra & Tasker, 2014), to name but a few.

The expanding interest in feminist solidarity can therefore to an extent be explained by these two key and inter-related larger contexts. The first is that this expansion in feminist solidarity has occurred as the shortcomings, problems and injustices of neoliberalism and its handmaiden, neoliberal feminism, have become increasingly palpable. The costs of a system which is socially liberal and welcoming of 'feminism' only in so far as it can be rendered compatible with capitalism (what Nancy Fraser terms 'progressive neoliberalism') have become all too visible and well understood as inequality deepens (Fraser, 2019; Fraser, Fassin, Littler, & Poggio, 2020). The second context is the rise of an authoritarian neo-nationalism, either neoliberal or beyond, characterized not by liberalism but by aggressive misogyny, homophobia and an unapologetic resurgent patriarchy (Brown, 2019).

These contexts provide a means of understanding the multifaceted actions which are taking place and which offer different forms of feminist solidarity: some large scale, some small, some explicitly socialist, some more liberal. As we have shown, the two examples of the Global Women's Strike and Women's March indicate how there is a steady increase in interest in feminist solidarity as part of what is now sometimes called a 'fourth wave' of feminism; a formation often characterized by digital activism and an active response to everyday sexism (Chamberlain, 2017; Rettalack, Ringrose, & Lawrence, 2016; Rivers, 2017).

In conclusion, we suggest that any effective feminist solidarity today will register some key facets of these contexts; but that beyond this feminist solidarity is most helpfully understood in as capacious a way as possible. Feminist solidarity needs to work in multiple ways and in multiple registers in order to become oriented towards challenging the power bases of neoliberal capitalism, and to mobilize around an economic agenda which does not redistribute shared economic resources to billionaires but rather redirects them towards the many on an equitable basis. The challenge for theories and practices of solidarity today is precisely to move 'beyond the fragments' (Rowbotham, Segal, & Wainwright, 1979) in this age of platform capitalism, a nascent left feminism and a resurgent right. It needs to engage on a vast level and in multiple ways. It requires analysis and practice that bring together economic with environmental, gender and racial justice. At the same time, any effective solidarity involves working 'across differences without trying to suppress them, and mak[ing] those differences productive' (Gilbert, 2018). It needs to create agonistic spaces – where people can argue and disagree in order to learn, and to avoid replicating the logic of totalitarianism (Mouffe, 2018) – whilst identifying and fighting for commonalities. Solidarity can be produced beforehand, afterwards or 'in the doing'; and it is most helpful for it to strive to be as reflexive as possible. Feminist solidarity, in other words, needs to retain its genealogical roots in left politics whilst being as plural as possible in practice.

As such, it is notable that the larger scale 'liberal' mobilization of the Women's March got people out on the streets who might well not have responded to the more explicitly left language of the Women's Strike, and that the Women's March was able to use the Women's Strike to move in the direction of a wider critique of the sexist nature of contemporary social reproduction by encouraging women to leave their workplaces on 8 March. In these different ways what Gago calls 'transversal vectors' were opened up between these spaces. Both spaces indicate the necessity of certain actions for any feminist movement to become larger in scale: of the importance of moving beyond the idea of a 'purity' of a 'correct' revolutionary politics – which dooms it to a hermetic existence in an enclave – and instead working strategically and being open to making alliances. This includes alliances between the grassroots and the party political, between the marginal and the popular mainstream. A left libertarian feminism certainly needs to cultivate solidarity, but these cultivations are not always easy, will always involve disagreement – not just on the communicative but also on the affective level – and will always be created in different and multiple forms and spaces. In

order to continue building this kind of feminist solidarity we will need to use different languages and registers, draw on our multiple resources and make a wide variety of strategic alliances between mainstream and margins in order to open it out together.

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There are no conflicts of interests.

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ENDNOTES

¹ To see excerpts from the press conference, see https://www.democracynow.org/2019/7/16/trump_racist_attacks_congresswomen_of_color

² See <https://www.womensmarchlondon.com/>

³ <https://www.womenstrikeus.org/> and <https://www.womensmarchlondon.com/> (accessed 28 October 2019).

⁴ <https://womenstrike.org.uk/about/>

⁵ <https://womenstrike.org.uk/about/>

⁶ <https://www.womenstrikeus.org/>

⁷ <https://womenstrike.org.uk/about/>

⁸ See <https://womenstrike.org.uk/product-category/posters/> (accessed 28 October 2019).

⁹ The 2019 US Green New Deal posters were created by the New York firm Tandem which also worked on Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's campaign. The images drew on and referenced images from the New Deal era of the 1930s, in particular the posters designed by the Federal Art Project, an office of the Works Progress administration, which employed unemployed artists to create some 32,000 posters about community arts projects, national park services and public health information. Right-wing media including *Fox News* and *The Daily Mail* ran stories condemning the posters as Soviet. See <https://www.citylab.com/design/2019/08/aoc-green-new-deal-posters-design-wpa-federal-art-project/597196/>; <https://www.foxnews.com/media/aoc-green-new-deal-art-series-propaganda>; <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-7414809/Trolls-liken-Alexandria-Ocasio-Cortezs-Green-New-Deal-posters-Soviet-era-propaganda-posters.html> (accessed 28 October 2019).

¹⁰ But interestingly for our purposes, these debates on transversal politics did not often use the word 'solidarity'.

¹¹ Although in the course of writing this article a centre-left president, Alberto Kirchner, has been elected. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/10/argentina-rejects-austerity-elect-alberto-fernandez-president-191028004353278.html>

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