

Direct Solidarity Waits to Be Nurtured and Prioritised

Evelin Lindner
Medical Doctor, Psychologist
Dr. med., Dr. psychol.
1st October 2020

Adapted from an early draft of
Lindner, Evelin Gerda (2022). *From Humiliation to Dignity: For a Future of Global Solidarity*.
Lake Oswego, OR: World Dignity University Press

Wherever I go on our planet, I observe humanity being in the grip of a large-scale self-deception. We are usually quick in laughing about the foolishness of certain ideas as long as they are far removed in time and place, we look back at misguided cultural beliefs of bygone times or remote locations and feel pity as long as they no longer affect us. We only feel indignation and anger when we still have to deal with the consequences. As I see it, by now, it is imperative to ‘seek out and fight against the insidious ideas of the present’, not just of the past.¹ When people say: ‘Germans ought to have stood up against Hitler!’ and ‘How come so many Germans said they did not know about the concentration camps! How could they be so blind!’ my answer is: ‘If we look back in history, and we are horrified by the blindness of Germans under Hitler — rightly so! — should we then not do our utmost to avoid being blind today? How can we point at the blindness of yesterday with indignation, while overlooking our blindness of today?’

Terms such as ‘poverty’ and ‘inequality’ are no longer adequate, observes also Saskia Sassen, a scholar of globalisation and migration, ‘While the visible narrative is one of progress and growing wealth, much of the tragedies are invisible: the expulsion of entire populations from their living spaces and unspoilt nature itself.’² The new invading weapon is not banking; it is finance ‘extracting value from very modest assets’.³ ‘Why we should bulldoze the business school’, is the catch title of an article in 2018.⁴

Indeed, I witness everywhere on this planet how societies and their members are first being lured into money systems only to see these systems being tweaked at the next turn by small elites who exploit the rest. People are hooked when they start to associate dignity with wealth and wealth with money. They are hooked when they agree to express all details of life in terms of market pricing as if it were a law of nature, when there are only ‘customers of services’, no ‘passengers’ anymore in trains or planes, no ‘students’, no ‘patients’, only ‘clients’. They are hooked when they categorise indigenous peoples who live without money and off wild food as ‘poor’.⁵ They are hooked when they regard the commons of this world, its social and ecological resources, as business opportunities.⁶ They are hooked when they agree to replace direct solidarity with money-based contracts, when they turn fellow human beings into mere contract holders and stakeholders.⁷

As soon as an entire community is hooked, its members have no choice anymore but to elbow their way through life to protect their contracts — *spitze Ellenbogen* is the literal German expression, or *spisse elbuer* in Norwegian — because going through life with open arms would be utterly foolish in a world where exploiters lurk from all sides. When dignity is money, and money is a commodity that can be accumulated — together with other ‘false commodities’ such as land and labour⁸ — trust is a weakness, trust is foolish naïvité. Holding hands in loving

solidarity is ill-advised in a world that is filled with tricksters and manipulators who aim at exploiting those who dare believe that dignity is something that can be realised through mutual care and solidarity. Dignity-as-money turns the world cold like a refrigerator, emptying it of all loving warmth.

In this situation, as I see it, societies who wish to be sustainable, need to turn their attention to what Fiske describes as the most comprehensive model of collaboration, namely, communal sharing. They need to stop allowing the narrowest model of social interaction, namely, market pricing, to continue hollowing out social and ecological resources. They need to become aware that the market-pricing model, even though it is hailed as a path to freedom, may create the opposite. A culture of ranked honour — the opposite of equal dignity — is the result when consumption offers effortlessly quantifiable stepping stones to higher rank, while quality of life attained through wisdom, knowledge, and the loving nurturing of relationships falls by the wayside. Defenders of neo-liberalism contend that it aims to liberate the individual from bondage in a collective, and that it will put contractual freedom in the place of inherited status.⁹ While liberation from bondage is a laudable goal, if the result is just another kind of bondage, namely, contractual bondage, the goal is missed. As it stands now, atomised individualism has replaced traditional community solidarity and has brought back inherited bondage by way of contractual bondage. In the United States, whole families are being bonded, bearing the burden that society as a whole ought to shoulder.¹⁰

In the face of rising contractual bondage, increasingly, I meet people who acknowledge that the status-quo is unacceptable and has to be transcended. New arrangements need to be tested and implemented if we wish to create a decent world, a world, where individuals connect in solidarity and free of bondage. Equal dignity, as I see it, can only emerge in contexts of communal sharing, in combination with the nurturing version of authority ranking. Equal dignity cannot be sustained in exploitative systems, it can only thrive in contexts that protect quality from being overly quantified, in the spirit of what political economist Karl Polanyi called the *substantivist* model of economy in contrast to the *formalist* model.¹¹ The task at hand, for humanity, is to exit from the grip of an exploitative system and define dignity and wealth as responsible solidarity and care, care for each other as members of a global human family, and care for our planet in connectedness and compassion.¹² Direct solidarity waits to be nurtured and prioritised wherever possible, while money-based contracts need to be used as little as possible.

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¹ See, among others, 'Why do we excuse the extremes of capitalism? Turns out, we're hardwired to conform — no matter how self-defeating the belief system', by Nick Cassella, *Civic Skunk Works*, 12th January 2018, <https://civicskunk.works/why-do-we-excuse-the-extremes-of-capitalism-e5fdd9b65397>. See the work of economist Richard Thaler, 2015, who received the 2017 Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences for showing that people do not act according to the rational choice of *Homo economicus*, findings that subvert the reigning economic order as much as Martin Luther's teachings did with the Catholic Church. A profit-driven economy leads to concentrated capital, as already economist Henry George understood in the mid-nineteenth-century, when he noticed that, 'the deepest poverty, the hardest struggle for existence' can be found not in pre-capitalist states, but 'wherever material progress is most advanced... where population is densest, wealth greatest, and production and exchange most highly

developed’, see George, 1879, introduction on <http://progressandpoverty.org/files/henrygeorge.drake/pchp0.htm>. See also an entertaining article featuring Henry George, ‘The forgotten forbearer of UBI: Who deserves anything anyway?’, by Will Stern, *Medium*, 14th August 2020, <https://medium.com/basic-income/the-forgotten-forbearer-of-ubi-ddead9ac5915>.

The modern economy is a recent invention, see *The invention of ‘the economy’*, by Jacob Goldstein, National Public Radio (NPR), 28th February 2014, www.npr.org/sections/money/2014/02/28/283477546/the-invention-of-the-economy?t=1551610802454: ‘If you’d asked somebody 100 years ago, “How’s the economy doing?” they wouldn’t have known what you were talking about’.

² *Breaking the wall of displacement: How social analysis sheds light on the edges of society*, by Saskia Sassen, Falling Walls Foundation, 9th November 2015, <http://falling-walls.com/videos/Saskia-Sassen-3780>. Saskia Sassen is a sociologist and professor at New York’s Columbia University, scholar of urban and globalisation studies, and of migration and mobility. See Sassen, 2014, *Expulsions — Brutality and complexity in the global economy*.

³ ‘Sassen — “We have entered a new era that the language of inequality cannot capture”’, by JTW Interview — *Turkish Weekly, Columbia University Global Thought*, 6th February 2015, <http://cgt.columbia.edu/news/sassen-we-have-entered-a-new-era-that-the-language-of-inequality-cannot-capture/>. See also “‘A way of monetizing poor people’”: How private equity firms make money offering loans to cash-strapped Americans’, by Peter Whoriskey, *Washington Post*, 1st July 2018, www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/a-way-of-monetizing-poor-people-how-private-equity-firms-make-money-offering-loans-to-cash-strapped-americans/2018/07/01/5f7e2670-5dee-11e8-9ee3-49d6d4814c4c_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.d2ca7a99bb6a.

⁴ ‘Why we should bulldoze the business school’, by Martin Parker, *The Guardian*, 27th April 2018, www.theguardian.com/news/2018/apr/27/bulldoze-the-business-school:

There are 13,000 business schools on Earth. That’s 13,000 too many. And I should know — I’ve taught in them for 20 years’ ... Business schools have huge influence, yet they are also widely regarded to be intellectually fraudulent places, fostering a culture of short-termism and greed. (There is a whole genre of jokes about what MBA — Master of Business Administration — really stands for: ‘Mediocre But Arrogant’, ‘Management by Accident’, ‘More Bad Advice’, ‘Master Bullshit Artist’ and so on.)

I had the privilege of meeting Neva Rockefeller Goodwin, a pioneer of contextual economics education, at the Thirtieth Annual E. F. Schumacher Lectures ‘Voices of a New Economics’, in New York City on 20th November 2010. A young student asked her which business school she would recommend to him if he wanted to learn about the real world economic challenges she had discussed in her talk. She recommended that he’d look outside of business schools or economics programs, at anthropology or sociology. On 2nd June 2016, in her comment to Escrigas, 2016, Neva Goodwin recommended the Heterodox news website, www.heterodoxnews.com. Under ‘study programs’, this site provides an annotated list of universities throughout the world that offer at least some courses which go beyond the mainstream. See also Lindner, 2012, pp. 16–17.

⁵ See, among others, ‘The key to a sustainable economy is 5,000 years old’, by Ellen Brown, *Web of Debt & TRANSCEND Media Service*, 2nd September 2019, <https://ellenbrown.com/2019/08/30/the-key-to-a-sustainable-economy-is-5000-years-old/>, and www.transcend.org/tms/2019/09/the-key-to-a-sustainable-economy-is-5000-years-old/.

⁶ See for the commons dilemma the work of Hardin, 1968, 1998, 2007, and Ostrom, 2010, Poteete, et al., 2010. The anti-commons dilemma — see Heller and Eisenberg, 1998 — is when rightsholders prevent a resource from being used by others — e.g., patent rights may prevent useful and affordable products from reaching those who need them. The commons dilemma describes a situation, where there are many who overuse commons, while the anti-commons dilemma points at a situation where a few keep commons for themselves.

⁷ See, among others, *Indigenous peoples and climate change: Emerging research on traditional knowledge and livelihoods*, edited Ariell Ahearn, Martin Oelz and Rishabh Kumar Dhir, International Labour Organization (ILO), 16th April 2019, www.ilo.org/global/topics/indigenous-tribal/publications/WCMS_686780/lang--en/index.htm.

⁸ See Polanyi and Joseph E. Stiglitz (Foreword), 1944/2001.

⁹ See Stanley, 1998.

¹⁰ Many wonder why the religious right in the United States is so committed to the free market and so infuriated by welfare, and why, on the other side, neo-liberal thinkers praise marriage and the family even in the absence of religious underpinnings. Political scientist Melinda Cooper, 2017, explains what happened by drawing on sociologist Gøsta Esping-Andersen, 1990, and his *Three worlds of welfare capitalism*, where he offered a classic categorisation for national regimes of social welfare programs: we all are dependent upon (1) the state, (2) the market, and (3) our families. Cooper, 2017, reports how there was a brief moment in American history where public spending on such public goods as higher education and housing was more prominent, where this was regarded as something to be financed by public spending. However, then came a pivotal turning point when all this was brought back to family obligations financed by private debt. This happened, when 1960s radicalism challenged accepted notions of family and sexuality and both neo-liberals and social conservatives found this deeply threatening. They identified public spending as a moral hazard — students had time to pursue unbecoming ideas because they or their families were not paying for their education themselves. The result, today, is a student body — including their families — mired in debt. Public spending on welfare was seen as another moral hazard, subsidising and even causing feminism and the breakdown of the family as it made women too independent of presumptive husbands and fathers. Cooper suggests that despite the completely different views on what ‘family’ means — neo-liberals see the family as a cluster of rational actors, while social conservatives see it as a sacred institution and a buffer against the market — both are satisfied with the neo-liberal family and the privatisation of risk and deficit spending as it serves neo-liberal opposition to the New Dealers’ visions of a family supported by social insurance, and at the same time it attends to conservative opposition to trends such as feminism and gay rights advocacy. In this way, Cooper differentiates the view that neo-liberalism privileges atomised individualism over familial solidarities and contractual freedom over inherited status. What it does in the United States is privileging atomised families over societal solidarities, which brings back inherited status by way of contractual bondage.

¹¹ The opposition between *substantivist* and *formalist* economic models was proposed by Karl Polanyi in 1944, see Polanyi and Joseph E. Stiglitz (Foreword), 1944/2001. See more in chapter 9.

¹² See, among others, Niemi and Young, 2016, Abstract:

Why do victims sometimes receive sympathy for their suffering and at other times scorn and blame? Here we show a powerful role for moral values in attitudes towards victims. We measured moral values associated with unconditionally prohibiting harm (‘individualising values’) versus moral values associated with prohibiting behaviour that destabilises groups and relationships (‘binding values’: loyalty, obedience to authority, and purity). Increased endorsement of binding values predicted increased ratings of victims as contaminated (Studies 1–4); increased blame and responsibility attributed to victims, increased perceptions of victims’ (versus perpetrators’) behaviours as contributing to the outcome, and decreased focus on perpetrators (Studies 2–3). Patterns persisted controlling for politics, just world beliefs, and right-wing authoritarianism. Experimentally manipulating linguistic focus off of victims and onto perpetrators reduced victim blame. Both binding values and focus modulated victim blame through victim responsibility attributions. Findings indicate the important role of ideology in attitudes towards victims via effects on responsibility attribution.

See also ‘Who blames the victim?’ by Laura Niemi and Liane Young, *New York Times*, 24th June 2016, www.nytimes.com/2016/06/26/opinion/sunday/who-blames-the-victim.html. I thank Linda Hartling for making me aware of this research. ‘Caring’ and ‘fairness’ are called ‘individualising values’ in this article, versus ‘loyalty-binding values’. I concur with Linda Hartling to call them ‘connectedness-

compassion values' versus 'loyalty-binding values'.
See, furthermore, Opatow, 1995.