

# Solidarity, Friendship and Anti Racism<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Anti Racist struggles often aim to construct alliances between groups under the banner of “solidarity” in order to achieve change. Using Foucault’s Society Must be Defended lectures as a basis, this paper interrogates the difficulties associated with creating solidarity in anti racist movements, when conflict and war might be treated as the basis for racial stratifications. Following from this, it is argued that friendships in spite of differences are possible under the guise of “truce”: that is through allegiances that begin by acknowledging the fact of war.

The concept of solidarity usually invokes aphoristic phraseology. We are told: “we need to find a way to work together.” We are told: “building solidarity is hard work, but necessary and good.” We are told: “we must learn to find common ground, a common cause”, or failing that, “accept that we have common enemies.” Anti racist activists are not immune to this language, since forged alliances and solidarities are often the bread and butter of cooperative anti racist work: “we are all on the same side after all.”

In contrast to these apparently commonsense alliances, in this paper I would like to explore the possibility that we actually inhabit a set of relationships that are antithetical to solidarity: namely the idea that we don’t have any common ground; that our starting point suggests we have no reason to work with each other; that we have no natural affiliations, perhaps no common enemy. Indeed you and I might be considered enemies.

I begin, therefore, with skepticism in relation to the idea of solidarity. I certainly do not wish to preclude the idea of friendship despite our differences. For although solidarity might be considered as a form of friendship, it is a palpably different sort of friendship I

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is an extension of a collaborative project between James Arvanitakis and myself exploring the nature and limits of anti racist politics, previously published under the title “Racists Like Us” (Arvanitakis and Wadiwel, 2007). As such, this paper is connected thematically to Arvanitakis’ own contribution to this volume.

seek, and with it, a different sort of politics that might guide anti racist struggle. Solidarity with a person who might otherwise be an enemy is a necessarily fraught venture, which risks misunderstanding, miscommunication, asymmetry, and amongst these factors, risks enshrining a form of domination under the name of friendship. It is the latter possibility that particularly concerns me, in so far as I am aware that the performative declaration of solidarity is easier – more convenient – than the actual project of friendship. In the words of Sara Ahmed, “it is the premature claim of solidarity, as if it is something we already have, that can block the recognition that there is much harder work to do” (2005, p.81). Solidarity might be considered a pernicious form of friendship. The possibility of friendship in spite of the machinations of racial stratification can never be convenient; it necessarily implies inconvenience, and a commitment to the hard work of disarmament that goes beyond the declaration of solidarity. In other words, as I discuss in this paper, the success of anti racism might depend upon the possibility of a more genuine friendship that ruptures the hostility of conflict.

### **Please, Not the Pie**

To begin, a fantasy of friendship: *Driving Miss Daisy* (1989). The film depicts the story of an older Jewish woman, Daisy, and her African American chauffeur, Hoke. The film tracks through several years, with reference to both the discrimination faced by Hoke, and the growing understanding Daisy has of racial prejudice and its relationship to her own background. Hoke and Miss Daisy become friends at the end, with at least two significant scenes in the film marking their bond of companionship: namely, a scene where Daisy, before being sent to a nursing home, confides in Hoke that he is her “best friend”; and a final scene where Hoke feeds Daisy some pie.

I would like to focus on just one aspect of the film that is useful for this paper: the idea of the *unlikely* friendship between Daisy and Hoke. For it is easy to like the idea of the unlikely friendship, to long to be enclosed in the seeping warmth of the moment where Daisy grasps Hoke’s hand and declares her friendship, and the reality of the racialised divide between these two seeming strangers melts. I certainly do not mean to say that

such friendships are not possible, or did not happen, because very clearly they did (and do) happen. But, what is revealing about this friendship is that it depicts a fantasy that we all want to see, a hope that we might ardently cling to: namely, the fantasy that a possible friendship between us in the face of adversity – a bond of solidarity – might be so powerful as to erase our very significant differences, including the antagonisms that lay between us as a precondition of our positioning within the schema of power.

The story interests me because it reminds me how easy it is to live out this fantasy when we dream of solidarity. It's so easy to imagine that you and I have a common cause, a common source of oppression, that we can lay aside our disagreements. Our solidarity will overcome our differences. Yet what I believe *Driving Miss Daisy* can show us is that we need to interrogate this desire to seek solidarity, understand what fantasies it fulfills, and most importantly, in so far as fantasies of allegiance, division and solidarity provide the symbolic guidance for the material effects of race and confer benefits for some within social, political, economic, sexual and juridical economies.

Liberal political theorists will idealise the concept of the democratic civil political space: a space where we are told it is possible for a range of diverse political subjects to engage freely in order to negotiate their differences. Regardless of your background, your class, your sexuality, your culture, your gender, we can all agree to meet in this supposedly “neutral space” on an equal footing. What concerns me about this line of reasoning, is that like the friendship in *Driving Miss Daisy*, it makes us forget the very real frictions that ensure that the civil political space is anything but fair, even footed or civil. In many respects these frictions suggest a war zone, where stratification and differences are the thresholds of contest between bodies within economies that inculcate material and symbolic violences, and guarantee that outcomes are never going to be fair.

It is with this idea of conflict within civility in mind, that we might usefully interrogate how the civil political space might be differentiated from war. Arguably modern political philosophy has held the distinction between war and civility as a central and defining feature of relationships of power. Thus, we find the cipher of war present within a range

of explanations for the civil political space: in Thomas Hobbes, for example, where a vision of a unifying sovereign power is counter-posed to a chaotic state of nature (Hobbes 1998); in the works of Niccolò Machiavelli for whom politics functions as the site of a subtle set of hostilities (Machiavelli 1950, p.39, 60); in Carl Schmitt on enemy / friend distinctions (Schmitt 1996); and in Derrida's reading of this and its implications for the political space (Derrida 1997). This perception of the nature of politics, which locates political power within a logical system informed by the knowledge of open contestation and strategic armed combat, was perhaps conveyed most acutely by Michel Foucault in a series of 1976 lectures, published in English under the title *Society Must Be Defended*. During this phase in Foucault's thinking, he came to understand all power relations as involving war through other means, and thus came to look for how intense life and death divisions between people were mediated within the civil political space:

War is the motor behind institutions and order. In the smallest of its cogs, peace is waging a secret war. To put it another way, we have to interpret the war that is going on beneath peace; peace itself is a coded war. We are therefore at war with one another; a battlefield runs through the whole of society, continuously and permanently, and it is this battlefield that puts us all on one side or the other. There is no such thing as a neutral subject. We are all inevitably someone's adversary (Foucault 2004, pp.50-1).

This view of politics is intended to disturb a view of power that sees civility and agreement as the basis for the social contract underpinning the civil political sphere. Peaceful civility is a ruse designed to conceal the violent effects of war: a ruse that, of course, benefits the victors in this war.

Race and racism is also closely tied to the account that Foucault offers in the lectures, since the stratifications within societies that Foucault associates with warlike domination generate the inside / outside relations of the nation and subdivide people into categorizations that are assumed to share a homogenous biological relation. Racism is thus "a way of separating out the groups that exist within a population ... a way of establishing a biological type caesura within a population that appears to be a biological domain" (Foucault 2004, p.255; see also Moreton-Robinson 2006). Racism works by

putting people at war with each other. The obvious divisions, for example, between black and white, illustrate this and deliver very real advantages: social, economic, and political.

And the nature of this war is to attempt to erase the fact that there is indeed a source of conflict: “peace itself is a coded war.” For example, in Australia, it has become a convention to acknowledge Indigenous people as the traditional owners of the land during public events, at conferences, before speeches etc. An acknowledgement of prior sovereignty hides the truth of war within it: the fact that I stand on this land because war has occurred, and continues to this day. This war, and the racialised economy it maintains, delivers benefits to range of people, including myself. Or, in the words of Cheryl I. Harris: “whiteness has value, whiteness is valued and whiteness is expected to be valued in law” (1993, p.1777). War is the unspoken element here; a war that is a battle for sovereignty; a war that I am inescapably invested in, because quite literally I stand on this land. This acknowledgement therefore can never be comfortable, easy or convenient, since it must always be inconvenient and disturbing because of my own investment within it. Really I should acknowledge that a war has occurred, a war that continues today, a war that I am inescapably part of, because I stand here.

Beyond this question of sovereignty and belonging, we should also note that racism also places us at odds with our own beings and our own body. We therefore are at war with ourselves. In my own life, I can't help but remember all too many times when I desperately wanted to be more civilized, more respectful, in a word, more 'white'. Yet I can also remember times when I desperately wanted to run from this assimilated self I had become, to be more ethnic, more 'black.' The war of race runs not only between you and I, but through myself, as a set of divisions that constantly puts me at odds with myself, with who I should be, and who I might be in the future. What is my essence? And why can't I be free of my essence?

If we are right to assume that we are at war with each other, that in fact we have no natural ground to collaborate, then where does this leave solidarity? As I have argued above, my concern with solidarity is the assumptions it carries with it, and the fantasies it

satisfies, without necessarily delivering benefits to all. It assumes that we might all be aggrieved parties, and share a common bond in our experience of the violence of race: a dream that those who share an experience of white domination should therefore enjoy a friendship, despite our differences. Solidarity in this guise rests on the fantasy of an easy friendship between aggrieved parties.

The concern with this is that it becomes all too easy to efface the differences between us, to forget the effects of war. And of course this sort of friendship is rarely symmetrical. So called solidarity will deliver benefits to some, and not to others. For example, it is quite fashionable in progressive politics to develop broad alliances around issues: for example to enable solidarity between those who work towards refugee or labour rights. And of course there are good strategic reasons for this, since solidarity, or at least a declaration of solidarity, can be a stepping stone towards social change.

Yet, who benefits from these temporary friendships? Are these solidarities there to provide benefit to all who join them, or are they construed to deliver benefits to just a few? When we march for workers' rights, will it be white, male, permanently employed workers who benefit most, while the very real demands of those we expect solidarity from, and claim solidarity with – outworkers, the unemployed, sex workers, casual employees, cleaners etc – are left aside? When we support rights for asylum seekers, will we forget the rights of others who share a similar experience of detention and fundamental disempowerment: Aboriginal people, for example, who have always been subject to arbitrary detention, the mission and reserve system, the institutionalization of children, and the extraordinary use of prisons as disciplinary devices?

In other words, will our alliances, our forms of solidarity, fail to address the war between you and me, after our marriage of convenience has ended? Will our capacity to quickly forget those we claim solidarity with merely reveal the fact that we were always at war with each other, and unwilling to cede our own territory, not even in the spirit of friendship?

This is important for considering how we might combat racism together, because race positions us all very differently, and provides opportunities to some and not to others. Is my desire, for example, to collaborate with Aboriginal or Arabic activists on issues of racism really about fulfilling my own fantasy for friendship, rather than a serious attempt to address racism broadly, since this means addressing my own position in it? Will my collaboration merely work to the benefit of the race war: reshuffle positions, only to leave the broad scaffolding of race in tact, the garrisons of whiteness still armed?

### **Ceasefire**

War ends when opponents stop seeking to injure each other. After war, a formal break in hostilities is usually marked with a treaty: a document that agrees on the terms of peace. However, if we follow Foucault's logic on the relationship of war to political power, we need not assume that a treaty suggests a future relationship of equality. Although the treaty provides security and recognition – the terms of peace – the treaty can also be understood in a negative sense as the means for continuing domination, since the agreement frequently confers rights for the victor, and derived from these rights, accords limited freedoms as “concessions” to the previous “enemy.” The treaty is a document bound by force, more often than not in the ever present threat that should hostilities break out again, an annihilatory violence will be unleashed by the stronger party. After the war, and after a crushing loss, those who face total defeat are usually compelled to accept the limited terms, to pay tithes and reparations, to conform to the laws set down by the victor, a simple choice between life and the uncomfortable reality of death. As Foucault states: “the will to prefer life to death; that is what founds sovereignty” (2004, p.95).

Another form of armistice is the *truce*. The truce is frequently seen as weaker than a treaty because of its fragility: ceasefires based upon truce are broken all the time, since they rely on agreements that are founded on mere trust, and are not backed by force. Yet truce offers a space that may benefit both parties, in allowing combatants to replenish, plan, assess the damage, redeploy, and negotiate with enemies. A truce does not signal the final end of hostilities, rather it creates a space where hostilities are broken, but with no guarantee that war may not be initiated again.

Where the treaty might signify the end of war and the beginning of domination by other means – through reparations, continuing exploitation, silent defeat – truce offers a free peace that is always conditional, always ready to be broken: fragile and utterly cognizant of the continued reality of war. Truce is not an equality in power, nor the equitable distribution of means of violence. But it might offer the prospect of a true opportunity for democratic peacability between warring parties, even if this is momentary (see Xenos 2001, Wolin 1994). In this context, I am aware here of the distinction that Jacques Derrida draws between fraternity and friendship: the former implying a brotherly bond to a political community or *polis*, the latter, the possibility of a proximity without bond or debt, “the one promised or promising without promising anything” (Derrida 1997, p.298). In other words, truce might function as a debtless friendship, a friendship where there is no apparent reason to be friends, perhaps the only friendship that is likely in war. But a friendship that only works through reciprocal and genuine (rather than theoretical) commitment to lay down weapons. And importantly, the disarmament that may eventuate as a result of truce is the necessary foundation for a treaty that might be capable of not merely reproducing existing forms of domination, but ending war, at least upon a particular front of confrontation. In other words, while truce is not the final answer, it is one way to consider a new allegiance, one which operates within the reality of historical and potentially continuing war, and provides the foundation for a different sort of friendship, a different politics.

In what way can we think of anti racist collaboration as a temporary armistice, where we put down our weapons within a race war? Are such peaceful friendships possible? And in what way would they offer a more effective foundation for thinking about solidarity, as a basis for a real contestation of racism, and not merely action that reproduces and intensifies the war between you and me?

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