Global History and Global Solidarity: Why We Shouldn’t Forget about Colonialism

THESIS

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Abstract

In the face of global problems, Jurgen Habermas recognizes the need for global solidarity. He thinks that universal human rights are best suited to ground such solidarity, but so far human rights have been only weakly motivating. I argue that, just as solidarity at the national level has often been built around a shared historical narrative, building a shared global historical narrative constitutes one important step towards solidarity at the global level. I propose the history of colonialism as an appropriate topic for such a global historical narrative, and then show how a narrative centered on the history of colonialism can yield ethical-political content that supports the project of global solidarity. Finally, I sketch the connection between narrative fiction and empathy, arguing that reading stories about colonialism is one practical way to build an appreciation for colonialism as a global narrative, and thus to work towards the larger goal of solidarity.
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Introduction

“[P]ractical reason fails to fulfill its own vocation when it no longer has sufficient strength to awaken, and to keep awake, in the minds of secular subjects, an awareness of the violations of solidarity throughout the world, an awareness of what is missing, of what cries out to heaven” (Habermas 2010, 18-19).

What is missing is solidarity. For Habermas, solidarity refers to the condition in which, “[w]hile remaining strangers to one another, members of the same ‘nation’ feel responsible enough for one another that they are prepared to make ‘sacrifices’” (2001, 64). Solidarity can grow out of religious conviction, shared history, or the simple recognition of common humanity. It can be operative over a range of scales: between two individuals, within a kin-based tribal structure, and certainly within the nation-state. However, so far solidarity has tended to stop at national borders. Universalistic legal and moral norms designed to safeguard fundamental human rights have achieved wide recognition, but they have not consistently motivated states to intervene in cases of gross violations of these rights. The crises in Darfur and, before that, Rwanda are only two of the most well-known examples of the failure to act in defense of the vulnerable. Human rights rationales for intervention too often wilt under the pressure of more compelling arguments about the economic and political costs of such policies.
The lack of global solidarity prevents stronger, more concerted, more consistent international action on a variety of genuinely global issues, from climate change to food security to pandemic disease. In this paper, I argue that global solidarity is an important goal to work for, and I propose the construction of a global historical narrative, centered on colonialism, as one plausible step towards achieving this goal. After sketching an argument for the importance of global solidarity (II), I take up Habermas’s proposal to think of global solidarity as a scaled-up version of national solidarity (III). I argue that he rejects his own proposal too quickly, on the grounds that there really is such a thing as a global history. The following section defends this claim by arguing that a plausibly global historical narrative can be built around the subject of colonialism (IV). From there I move into a discussion of the ethical-political content that the narrative of colonialism can support, and how it contributes to the achievement of solidarity (V). Finally, I highlight the connection between narrative fiction and empathy in order to argue that reading stories about colonialism is one practical way to build an appreciation for colonialism as a global narrative, and thus to work towards the larger goal of solidarity (VI).

Why is Global Solidarity Important?

Globalization and interdependence are commonly used to explain the need for solidarity, but the connection is not self-evident. Indeed, the collaboration and
coordination problems that interdependence generates can often be solved without solidarity. This is the intuition behind the basic neoliberal institutionalist argument that states create international institutions in order to solve collective action problems and more effectively engage in processes of cooperation (see, e.g., Stein 1982). In some cases cooperation is the best alternative for egoistic rational actors. The mere fact of joint decision-making does not mean there is some bond or solidary “we-feeling” between them, only that their interests in a particular situation are not entirely incompatible. It is possible, of course, that institutions and repeated cooperation can socialize actors over time, foster the emergence of collective identities, and thus redefine “self-interest” to look more like collective interests (see Johnston 2001), but this does not mean that solidarity is necessary to address problems of interdependence.

At this point it is important to distinguish, with Habermas, two types of problems that arise under interdependence: technical problems and political problems. Simple policy coordination is sufficient to solve technical problems; solidarity is superfluous. These problems can be delegated to experts. Political problems, though, concern issues like energy, the environment, and economic policy, and “impinge on entrenched interests which are deeply rooted in the structures of national society” (2008b, 446). Political problems entail substantial costs for at least some of the parties involved, and the decisions about who will pay how much to whom for how long cannot be taken by a panel of experts. Rather, these decisions can only be legitimate when they are linked up with the discursive
opinion- and will-formation of citizens in the relevant domestic publics. The willingness to bear costs for the sake of others is a large part of what solidarity is about, and public deliberation can help people access latent stores of solidarity.

Of course, political problems do not simply dissolve at the invocation of “solidarity.” One reason political problems can be especially difficult to solve, even if some level of solidarity obtains, is that the costs that solving problems imposes are sometimes avoidable, if only by walking away from the table.¹ For example, during the 1998-1999 conflict in Kosovo, NATO members could have simply refused to pay the costs of forceful intervention on behalf of the Kosovar Albanians. Instead, though, they chose to pay the costs of a bombing campaign. This is exactly the type of sacrifice that bonds of solidarity can motivate in the face of difficult political problems.

Within the domain of political problems, Habermas makes a further distinction that identifies a special subset of political problems that are truly global in scope, as opposed to problems that are more or less confined to particular localities. These global problems he calls “problems important for human survival” (1998a, 177). Nile water rights, for example, are a political problem that can be dealt with at the regional level, but global climate change, AIDS and other pandemics, and international terrorism are problems relevant to the population of the planet as a whole, and so belong in the set of global problems. These are

¹ The Greek debt crisis is a case in which key European states could not simply walk away. Germany’s eventual decision to support the bailout in 2010 probably had little to do with solidarity; letting Greece go under was simply not an option.
problems to be thematized in a “future world domestic policy” agenda (Habermas 2008a, 324).

Obviously, the domestication of international politics is far from complete, and the population of the planet still seems a long way from thinking of itself as a single demos. But this is another way of getting at what the project of building global solidarity is about, namely building a global analogue to the national demos, with its shared identity and historical narrative. The pursuit of global solidarity is about the construction of a sufficiently common global self-understanding—including a common historical self-understanding—in which people around the world, regardless of their citizenship or state of residence, see themselves as (1) engaged in a common political project, at least as far as global political problems are concerned, and (2) as being in some sense responsible to one another, again regardless of citizenship.

But does it make sense to focus on building solidarity among “people around the world”? Why not among states? After all, we continue to live in a Westphalian world populated by sovereign states, and at least for the foreseeable future, states will continue to be the primary institutions through which global problems are addressed on a formal level. Thinking about solidarity on these two levels helps us distinguish two problems that are in play. The first is a motivational problem, namely how people can be motivated to develop bonds of solidarity with one another. The second is a structural one, namely how to ensure that solidarity on a
popular level is not overwhelmed by considerations of national interest and *realpolitik* at the policymaking level.

This paper is primarily oriented toward the motivational problem. I have tried to show the importance of the motivational problem by linking solidarity to the resolution of global problems. If we feel more and thicker bonds with others, the argument goes, we will be more willing to make sacrifices on their behalf and to bear the costs required to solve pressing global problems, even when there are incentives to free ride. Still, it would be a mistake to focus on motivating solidarity if the greatest obstacle to the resolution of global problems were not motivational but structural, i.e. the sovereign state system itself. If states are where the action is, why focus on everybody else?

The basic idea is that building a sense of solidarity at the level of individuals and groups of people is an important part of the process of bringing states into relations of solidarity, too. In particular, if extant stores of solidarity can be mobilized in civil society and channeled into domestic and transnational public spheres, it might be possible to pressure or persuade governments to revise their understandings of what pursuing the “national interest” looks like. On the other hand, if citizens do not feel a sense of solidarity with one another, then it is highly unlikely that we will see solidarity among states. This is the rationale for this paper’s focus on motivating solidarity among people, even though the structural problem posed by the state system presents a serious challenge in its own right.
Returning to the notion of global problems, one might raise another objection. This objection suggests that, if some of the above problems are truly global in scope and truly threatening to human survival, then they will inevitably lead to global solidarity, or at least to sufficient cooperation among states to avert the impending disasters. On this view, trying actively to build solidarity loses its urgency. Unfortunately, the reality of problems does not imply the existence, let alone the inevitability, of solutions. As Waltz puts it, “A strong sense of peril and doom may lead to a clear definition of ends that must be achieved. Their achievement is not thereby made possible. The possibility of effective action depends on the ability to provide necessary means...Necessities do not create possibilities” (in Keohane 1986, 106-07).

Furthermore, while some have attempted to revive teleological arguments in social science (e.g. Wendt 2003), the dream of inexorable progress has been haunted by appalling periods of regress. The underdetermined, fitful unfolding of history should caution us against a naïve faith in the future turning out a certain way because it “has to.”² The upshot is that, in the face of pressing political problems, global solidarity ought to be prioritized and pursued with purpose. In what follows, I propose a strategy for achieving this goal. I begin by considering Habermas’s reflections on the connection between solidarity and the idea of the “nation,” and

² Wendt's (2003) argument is not naïve in this way. He fully acknowledges that progress towards a world-state will not be linear or free of false-starts and setbacks. Still, the argument is that a world-state really is inevitable in the long run, and I want to insist that this long-term inevitability does not constitute a satisfactory solution to increasingly pressing global problems.
then proceed to develop an argument about how global solidarity might be achieved, focusing on the construction of a common historical narrative.

The National Model

The history of the modern system of nation-states provides much support for the thesis that the idea of the “nation” has been crucial for the achievement of solidarity among large populations spread across large swaths of territory. With this model in mind, Habermas suggests that the construction of “nations” might somehow be scaled-up to the global level (1997, 168-72). Such a project must be undertaken carefully, though. Nationalism has indeed proven to be a powerful force for social integration, but its integrative triumphs have often been won at the expense of domestic pluralism. This is clearly a problem to be avoided, both at the level of nation-states and at the level of a future world society. Much of Habermas’s work is in fact addressed more or less to this problem. The theory of communicative action, discourse ethics, the emphasis on procedural conception of democracy, universal morality and human rights—all of these link up with the question of social integration in a pluralist context.

In order to scale up, it is important first to see what Habermas has to say about the construction of nations. The first characteristic of nations, of course, is that they are artificial; nations are made, not found (see, e.g., Miller 1993). The “nation” is the idea “that first makes the inhabitants of a state’s territory aware of a
new, politically mediated form of belonging together”; it is this idea that met the need of the state for “an idea...that could appeal more strongly to hearts and minds than could the ideas of a people’s sovereignty and human rights by themselves” (Habermas 1997, 171). And critically, it is an awareness, “which crystallizes around a common origin, language, and history...that makes [citizens] feel that they belong to the same political community and feel responsible” for one another (ibid., 172).

However, the world is not one nation, but many, and there is certainly no unifying political culture that they all share. In Habermas’s view the only common thread that can hope to stitch the planet's politics together is universal human rights. On this basis he concludes that “cosmopolitan solidarity has to support itself on the moral universalism of human rights alone” (2001, 108). If this conclusion were true, it would present a formidable challenge to the project of global solidarity, given that human rights are often only weakly motivating. But perhaps Habermas has given up too much here. True, the world has no common language, no common culture, no shared thick morality that might nourish a global solidarity. But it does, I will argue, have a common history, and this history can be a source of common ethical-political commitments. In this way, history can thicken the solidarity that human rights alone have been unable to make effective.
What Global History?

Some assert that the world has no history, only histories. Michael Walzer, for example, argues that “[s]ocieties are necessarily particular because they have members and memories, members with memories not only of their own but also of their common life. Humanity, by contrast, has members but no memory” (1994, 8). Momentous events in one society are not totally meaningless or unintelligible to other societies, of course, but his claim is that there is no way to arrange every society’s momentous events into “one grand parade” because “there is no reason to think that they are all heading in the same direction” (ibid., 9).

Walzer’s point is well taken, but it should not dissuade us from searching for a historical narrative—or the seed of one—3—that is global in scope. It is not necessary to weave every event in the history of each society into a single tapestry; rather, it would be enough to find a single thread of historical experience that is globally shared. This suggests a focus on particular events that were globally visible, and so in that limited sense globally experienced. Habermas describes the Vietnam War and the first Gulf War in these terms, focusing on their worldwide transmission via global media outlets (1998a, 176). Jeffrey Alexander’s (2002) work on the evolution of interpretations of the Holocaust offers another example in this vein. He traces understandings of the Holocaust from its original role as a piece

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3 That is, we do not need to assume that a global historical narrative is out there fully formed, lying just below the surface, waiting to be discovered. Anderson (2006) shows that, while national identity cannot be created entirely ex nihilo, the national project needs only a minimal amount of content—historical, cultural, linguistic, etc.—to get off the ground (see especially Ch. 4).
of supporting evidence in the larger narrative of Nazism’s radical evil, through its several reinterpretations and reframings, to its current status as a “moral universal.” Today, he argues, the Holocaust is a universally recognized “tragic archetype and a central component of moral judgment in our time” (ibid., 52).

Hopgood (2009) picks up on this universalization process as well, applying it to the case of Amnesty International and the universal symbolism of the prisoner of conscience. His argument, though, is that the universalization process is inevitably a thinning one. Universalization means standing back to see the broad contours of a story, but at the price of losing sight of the unique particularities that made the event compelling in the first place. In other words, the motivating force of a particular historical event drains away as the story is reframed, reimagined, and reinterpreted in order to make it more widely accessible.

If Hopgood is right, his argument has serious consequences for any attempt to use an alleged common history to help ground global solidarity. However, his thinning objection applies only to attempts to universalize what are in fact particular historical events, i.e. events that happened in one place and not all places, at one time and not all times, to some people rather than all people. It would not apply to events that happened to the world. Are there any events that were experienced worldwide?

Globalization is a promising candidate for a world-historical narrative. The term covers a variety of “interrelated changes: economic, ideological, technological, political, and cultural” that enable integration on a truly global scale (Kacowicz
2007, 567). Today almost all lives bear in some way the imprint of globalization, whether that means eating at McDonalds in the Ukraine, Panama, or the Philippines; coordinating pro-democracy demonstrations by Twitter in Egypt and sending images around the world instantly to mobilize international pressure; or adapting to the local economic pressures and opportunities created by huge multinationals and increasingly mobile capital.

However, one of the reasons that virtually everyone is affected by globalization today is that the term incorporates such a wide range of phenomena. Indeed, globalization is a huge concept; this would make building a coherent narrative around it difficult, though perhaps not impossible. To make the term and the narrative less unwieldy, it makes sense to isolate and thematize one particular aspect of globalization. The economic dimension, which Kacowicz thinks represents globalization’s “most salient dimension” (ibid.), would be a sensible choice. My proposal here runs along these lines, though I want to focus not on contemporary processes of globalization but on a series of projects that laid significant groundwork for the kinds of global integration we see today. I want to argue that the history of colonialism—which might be considered the opening sequence in globalization’s grand parade (to use Walzer’s image)—provides a plausibly global narrative that can survive universalization’s thinning pressures.

Colonialism can ground a global narrative for two reasons. First, unlike the Holocaust or the Vietnam War, colonialism was approximately global in scope. At one time European powers “held a grand total of roughly 85 percent of the earth as
colonies, protectorates, dependencies, dominions, and commonwealths” (Said 1993, 8). Indeed, identifying states that were not colonized at some point during the colonialist expansions of the 16th-20th centuries—and that were not colonizers themselves—is quite a challenge. Thailand (Siam) was never colonized, one might argue, but even she was forced to cede swaths of territory to the French in 1893, 1904, and 1907, and to the British in 1909 (Townsend 1941, 535). And Ethiopia, though a member of the League of Nations, made concessions to the British, French, and Italians before ultimately falling to Mussolini in 1936 (ibid., 142-50).

Colonialism’s global scope means that it is a universally accessible narrative as is. Of course, colonialism took different forms across time and across space, but the fundamental themes—the involuntary loss of autonomy; political, social, and economic dislocations; the superiority-inferiority dynamic—make the local variations recognizable as variations on an underlying theme. In this way, colonialism can become the subject of universally accessible narrative without requiring the homogenization of the particular historical cases.

An obvious objection at this point is that different countries played opposite and antagonistic roles in the narrative of colonialism: one set of communities played the role of colonizers, and another set played the role of the colonized. It seems counterintuitive to argue that a narrative built on this fundamentally antagonistic foundation could be useful for the purpose of building solidarity among all the actors. I will have more to say about this objection below, but here I want to point out that a structurally similar problem has already been dealt with at the domestic
level. The history of slavery in the United States has obvious parallels with the history of colonialism internationally, and indeed it links up with the history of colonialism in important ways. Today, though, almost all Americans recognize slavery as a great evil, whether they are the descendents of slaves or slave-owners, whether the states they live in were slave states or free. There is, of course, serious political disagreement about how we ought to respond collectively to the history of slavery (see, e.g., Torpey and Burkett 2010), but there is widespread agreement about what happened during slavery, and there is widespread consensus around the idea that slavery is not something that “we” do anymore. The point is that a structurally similar problem has already been solved at the domestic level; doing so on the global level will not be easy, but we should not think that scaling up to the global level makes the problem intractable.

The second reason that colonialism makes a plausible candidate for a global historical narrative is that colonialist expansion in the 16th-20th centuries is not a marginal story in world history. Indeed, colonialism is the apparatus by which the world was stitched, chained, and bound together. Colonialism is a globalized world society’s foundation narrative. When one looks at a map of the world today, the scars of colonialism and decolonization are evident. In contemporary North-South economic relationships, one sees the lingering effects of colonial economic policies. In this sense, the colonial narrative is not merely a tool to be used in the larger project of building global solidarity; it also has substantive relevance for precisely
the kinds of distributive political issues to which an emerging global solidarity will respond.

My argument then is that the intentional construction and public thematization of the history of colonialism can facilitate the development of global solidarity. It can do this by creating a “context that is everyone’s” (Michelman, quoted in Forst 2002, 134), which can nourish a burgeoning global collective identity. In Forst's words, “The collective identity of an ethically, ethnically, and religiously pluralist society consists of more than the mere principles of inclusion…it consists of the history of exclusion and inclusion, the history of common experiences” (ibid., 136). What is the history of colonialism if not just such a history of exclusion and inclusion, of domination and subordination?

But here again, the obvious objection reasserts itself: trying to build solidarity out of a history of exclusion sounds like a fool’s errand. Isn’t such a narrative as likely to drive communities farther apart as it is to bring them closer together? In that case, perhaps we ought to try to forget the past rather than thematize it. Renan famously highlights the importance of forgetting for national solidarity, arguing that “the essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common; and also that they have forgotten many things” (1990 [1882], 11). For example, “every French citizen has to have forgotten the massacre of Saint Bartholomew,” in which thousands of Huguenots were killed over a period of several weeks during the French Wars of Religion (ibid.). How can the goal of unity be served by holding on to the memory of an event like that?
I think there are two ways to respond to this serious objection. The first response would be to say that trying to tell the truth about the past—especially the ugly parts—has in fact led to solidarity gains in real cases. The Truth & Reconciliation Commission in South Africa provides one powerful example of such a result. The Apartheid regime in South Africa was of course the epitome of a divisive and conflictual social order, and yet the TRC has had a positive influence on reconciliation in South African society. Gibson shows that, contrary to the fears of many “that the revelations of the TRC would harden black attitudes toward whites, making coexistence...even more difficult” (2004, 215), black attitudes have not hardened against whites, and moreover racial attitudes have become more positive among the white, Coloured, and Asian communities.

Still, providing evidence from the South African case and others we might look at only shows that thematizing memories of past injustices does not always lead to violence or fragmentation. The objection would still carry significant force if these outcomes are relatively rare, compared to outcomes in which remembering the past drives victims and perpetrators farther apart. I am not in a position to estimate the relative frequency of either outcome, but what is important to point out—and this is the second move to make in responding to the objection—is that whether memories of past wrongs lead to solidarity or fragmentation is not a random walk. Rather, the outcomes generated by the political mobilization of memory are directly related to the way the historical events are framed, that is, to
the choices of political elites and entrepreneurs. Booth, writing about the conflict in Northern Ireland, puts the point well:

“[V]iolence (even in such long-troubled locales as Ulster) is episodic: same past, same memories, sometimes peace, sometimes war. The difference cannot be explained by the past alone, which is a constant, but rather one must look to changing factors that cause that memory to awaken in violence... It needs the work of the present, of militants, for those elements to be picked out and made central to a community’s life” (2009, 364).

The goals of the individuals and groups that want to press the past as a political issue in the present determine how historical wrongs will be framed and what the menu of responses includes. It is certainly possible for politicians or other public figures to use elements of colonial history to inflame anti-Western sentiment or stir up nationalist fervor, but the same events can also be framed as setbacks to be overcome or wounds that need to be healed.

This might make it sound like solidarity is required ex ante to ensure that history will be used in the “right” way, but this is not the case. Solidarity comes out of the process of engagement; all that is required is the desire to seriously engage the other side(s) for the purpose of achieving a shared understanding, along with some minimal amount of substantive content—an historical or cultural “seed”—that can be cultivated. Even these minimal prerequisites can be quite hard to come by, but the point is that the pursuit of solidarity does not presuppose solidarity’s existence, and moreover that whether memories of exclusion and violence foster
solidarity or fragmentation is a function of the choices people make about what to do with the past.

But perhaps emphasizing the importance of the intentions behind the public use of history only raises another problem. Now the worry might be that the intentional construction of a historical narrative for political purposes invites the misuse of history. Or, to put the point in Rawlsian terms, there is a danger that the narrative construction process could become political in the wrong way. This objection can be split into two distinct arguments. The first targets the solidarity-building purpose that motivates the historical project, and the second targets the quality of motivated history per se.

The first argument is put forcibly by Jabri, who contends that the “liberal cosmopolitan articulation of solidarity simply reasserts the sovereignty of the most powerful,” who understand their purpose “in moral terms, constructed in terms of saving others, just warriors engaged in the rescue of other, distant populations” (2007, 722). On this view liberal cosmopolitanism is just another Western imperialist ideology, a new justification for a mission civilisatrice and for the exercise of Western power over Others. Certainly, insofar as the process of engagement I have proposed leads to increased interaction between former colonizers and the formerly colonized, charges of neo-imperialism will be easy to raise. But the problem is not the desire for solidarity or for a stronger sense of community among the peoples of the earth. The problem is the imposition of solidarity by some on others. Here, “solidarity” would be just another name for the colonial style of
domination and coercion that the history-building process is designed to surface, repudiate, and move beyond. The process of constructing a shared historical narrative rests on the premise that a shared understanding can be agreed upon but not imposed. Likewise, genuine solidarity can only be realized with the consent of the actors involved.

The second argument holds that motivated history is unlikely to be accurate history, because motivation aggravates biases in sorting and representing the historical evidence. In response to this objection, one might wonder what representation of history is *not* motivated. Looking to the past almost always means looking *for* something in the past. As Alexander argues, “Social narratives are not composed by some hidden hand of history,” but by human beings (2002, 34). This is not to say that “anything goes” when it comes to narrating the past. For any fixed body of evidence, only a limited range of narratives will offer plausible interpretations, and if new evidence comes to light, then the set of plausible narratives is likely to change as a result (MacGilvray 2004, 82). Still, the limited constraining power of evidence cannot support an argument against the continuing “representation” of history. Rather, the constructed nature of historical narratives should remind us to “treat with suspicion the homogenizing implications of much of the language of collective memory and identity” (Booth 2009, 373). When representing the past, statements about what “we” did to/for “them” and vice versa must be taken provisionally and kept open to challenge by other voices, from both the past and the present.
Recall that the preceding objections arose when I claimed that the narrative of colonialism could help develop a global collective identity by creating, in Michelman’s phrase, a “context that is everyone’s” (in Forst 2002, 134). Now I want to expand the claim to include the idea that the productive capacity of the colonial narrative goes beyond a shared identity. The recognition of this common history can foster a learning process that leads to agreement on shared ethical-political norms of two broad types: (1) norms of distributive justice, and (2) norms that orient us towards the prevention of humiliation.

Except in cases of relatively recent colonialism—Israel comes to mind as a potential (if highly controversial) case, as well as perhaps South Africa—retributive justice will not be a major point of discussion among people trying to figure out how to respond to the history of colonialism. In most cases, the colonizers and the colonized are long dead, rendering moot the question of punishment. Distributive justice, though, is a different matter: redistribution from colonizing states to former colonies will be a topic of major importance. By tracing the effects of colonialism on different communities over time, we can hope to understand more adequately the way colonialism distorted the human and economic development trajectories in much of the global South. Such knowledge might suggest, for example, that dispossessed indigenous populations have a right to “compensation for lost development rights” (Barkan 2000, xxvii), or that terms of trade ought to be
adjusted in favor of former colonies, or that former colonies ought not to be forced into rigid adherence to severe Structural Adjustment Programs in order to receive aid from the IMF.

The second class of norms that could grow out of learning processes oriented by the colonial narrative would focus on the prevention of humiliation. Humiliation is one of the major themes of this narrative, in which indigenous populations were disrespected, condescended to, and ostensibly “civilized” by “superior” people from other lands. The colonized were treated as children or worse; their bodies and homelands were violated; their cultures ridiculed and made to make way. There is much humiliation here to be named and acknowledged. Importantly, though, the experience of humiliation does not belong exclusively on the side of the colonized. Whatever the colonizers felt at the time, the remembrance of what one’s forebears did to humiliate others will be in its own way humiliating for the one who remembers. The two humiliations are not identical, but they are both humiliations and we can recognize that in one another (see Rorty 1989).

Another way of putting the point is to say that the narrative of colonialism can offer support to those struggling for recognition. These are struggles over “the interpretation and satisfaction of historically unredeemed claims,” struggles in which “participants voice collective experiences of violated integrity” (Habermas 1998b, 204). Indeed, such struggles for recognition are precisely the ground in which solidarity can take root, when the participants see that everyone’s integrity was more or less violated through the colonization of the planet, and moreover that
the violation done to each cannot be worked through by each actor working alone. Without mutual recognition, arguments about one party’s responsibility to make restitution for past wrongs committed against another are unlikely to be motivating; without recognition, there is no relationship to repair. Against a background of mutual recognition, though, the notion of responsibility takes on a motivating force that can lead the “responsible” party to make sacrifices or bear costs for the sake of the party that it wronged in the past, and for the sake of their relationship moving forward. This is how the construction of a shared narrative of colonialism can facilitate the growth of solidarity.

It is important to realize here that recognitive norms help to reinforce distributive norms. The recognition involved in appreciating a shared colonial history should stimulate serious investigations into the long-term structural consequences of that history along economic, environmental, educational, and political-institutional dimensions. If the intentional, focused thematization of the specific historical-structural causes of large-scale poverty, environmental degradation, educational inequities, and deformations of political systems can implicate particular colonial policies more or less directly, then arguments about one nation’s responsibilities to another in the present can be sharpened and strengthened.

Furthermore, as Miller (2007) suggests, once the parties agree on the facts, specific instances of colonial-era theft and dispossession can, as far as possible, be rectified. Dispossessed groups can then demand “that items of symbolic significance
seized from their original owners should be returned to those owners or their
descendants” (136). Returning property—be it artwork or archaeological treasures
or the Rosetta Stone—has serious symbolic value quite apart from the monetary
value of the property in question: it means that the one who took the property
recognizes the former owner’s legitimate right to it, and on that basis will forgo the
benefits of maintaining possession.

Clearly, we should not expect the recognitive and redistributive norms I have
described here to dominate other strategic and interest-based considerations in
every case. Increasing agreement on a global narrative of colonialism within civil
society and among government officials will generate pressures for redistribution
on the part of former colonial powers, but these will often be overwhelmed by the
range of countervailing pressures included in governments’ political calculations.
Still, we should not set the bar too low, either. If the project of building a shared
global narrative around colonialism succeeds, one of the results will be an extended
notion of “we” that includes former colonizers and the formerly colonized.
Expanding identity in this way should make redistribution more feasible, in the
same way that the expansion of identity on the national level has facilitated
redistribution. So we can expect redistributive norms to carry the day some of the
time, and increasingly so as the narrative of colonialism becomes more established.

I hope by this point to have shown that the idea of using the history of
colonialism to ground solidarity is plausible. In the next section I would like to
highlight the role that one particular resource, namely narrative fiction, can play in
building an appreciation for colonialism as a global narrative and in the larger project of building global solidarity.

The Role of Literature

If the history of colonialism is going to ground global solidarity, what practical steps might we take? Martha Nussbaum’s notion of cosmopolitan education represents one important project. She argues that, “in addition to giving special attention to the history and current situation of their own nation, [students ought to] learn a good deal more than they frequently do...about India and Bolivia and Nigeria and Norway and their histories, problems, and comparative successes” (1996, 6). For purposes of this discussion, a cosmopolitan education would involve reworking history and social studies curricula to include the study of colonialism in other countries, as well as in our own.

This proposal is good as far as it goes—indeed, something like it is probably indispensable for the project I am advocating—but on its own it will not be sufficient, for the same reason that human rights have not been enough to motivate robust solidarity. The cognitive-factual orientation of cosmopolitan education will likely carry only weak motivational power. I want to argue that narrative fiction can help address this motivational deficit, oriented as it is towards affect and identity. More specifically, I argue that fictional stories about colonialism are an important
resource for building an appreciation for colonialism as a global narrative, and thus for the larger project of building global solidarity.

But how could fictional stories serve this purpose? Why should we think it does “any good to tell stories...in a world in which many people’s daily lives are dominated by various forms of exclusion and oppression” (Nussbaum 1995, xvii)? Here I want to argue that reading stories—i.e. narrative fiction—can cultivate solidarity in two ways: (1) by increasing readers’ capacity for empathy, thereby increasing the potential for prosocial, solidary behavior, and (2) by offering resources for identity [re]creation in response to social trauma.

The idea that reading narrative fiction is related to empathic abilities features prominently in the work of philosophers, literary theorists, and psychologists, though the mechanics of the relationship are not fully understood. Mar et al. (2006, 698) offer three potential explanations for why reading fiction might be positively related to empathy and prosocial functionings. First, readers might simply learn about how social interactions work by reading about social interactions between characters in a story and then generalize this knowledge to their own interactions in the world. Alternatively, the detailed imagery and fine-grained characterization that makes stories seem believable and authentic might provide opportunities for readers to “hone their inference and monitoring skills,” which can then be deployed in their own forays into sociality. Or perhaps individuals with more developed empathic abilities are more likely to read narrative
fiction in the first place, because they are able to engage more successfully with the characters in the story, just as they do with individuals in their own lives.

On these three explanations, which are not mutually exclusive, the direction of causality is unclear. Does reading stories increase empathy, or does being more empathically-inclined cause you to read more fiction, on average? Both alternatives are plausible, and both may well be true. Endogeneity is only a problem for my argument, though, if the arrow points only from empathy to reading more stories. As long as reading has some effect on empathy, then my argument retains its pro tanto plausibility.

But why should reading stories about others foster empathy? One way they do this is by helping readers imagine others more successfully (see, e.g., Nussbaum 1995). Elaine Scarry argues that “the human capacity to injure other people is very great precisely because our capacity to imagine other people is very small” (Nussbaum et al. 1996, 103). Fictional stories—especially novels, which tend to offer more robust character development and greater opportunity for identification with characters and their projects than other genres do—can cultivate this capacity in readers. Mar and Oatley echo this claim, suggesting that fiction “trains us to

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4 Mar et al. (2006) acknowledge this endogeneity problem, and they suggest ways to approach the problem empirically in the future. They also provide one interesting reason to think that the effect of empathy on reading might be weak: “It would be slightly surprising if individuals who are naturally empathic and skilled socially were to prefer a solitary pursuit such as reading over their unhindered and easy interactions with peers in the real-world. The schema of a bookworm present in North American culture (and other cultures, such as in Japan), describes a child withdrawing from his or her social world (often due to rejection) into a world of fantasy wrought by narratives. It seems unlikely that this conception would have absolutely no basis in reality” (707).
extend our understanding toward other people, to embody (to some extent) and understand their beliefs and emotions” (2008, 181).

And indeed there is some empirical evidence for this claim. Lichter and Johnson (1969), for example, found that children who read from a “multiethnic reader” for four months—the multiethnic reader was identical to the standard version, except that some of the white characters from the standard reader were replaced by non-white characters—showed significantly more positive attitudes toward African Americans than students who worked only with the standard readers. More recently, Mar et al. (2006) have shown that greater exposure to narrative fiction is associated with more developed empathic abilities.

The argument to this point needs to be qualified in several ways, though. First, it is wrong to say that literature per se has prosocial effects. Indeed, from an historical perspective literature has often been part of the problem. Certainly this was true in the case of colonialism, which was reinforced, justified, and made sense of in no small part through the body of novels, poetry, travelogues, and the like that dealt with distant places and distant Others. This I take to be one of the central theses of Said’s (1994) devastating critique of Orientalism, which remains a sobering reminder that sometimes our ability to imagine others is no too weak, as Scarry fears, but too strong. Western representations of the Other were reified over time and naturalized through repeated use, and as a result they became totally unaccountable to the voices of those being represented. Empathizing with characters in Orientalist novels led to cruelty and injustice because those characters
had lost all connection to the actual conditions and ways of life that real “Orientals” lived every day.

Furthermore, as Scarry points out, the empathy gains that stories can yield will be limited to the extent that we read stories that are mostly about people like us. She rightly worries that “[t]he latent nationalism or tribalism of great literature may make it a seductive vehicle for an exercise in self-reflection and self-identification, rather than reflection upon and identification with people different from oneself” (Nussbaum et al. 1996, 104). This point is well-taken, but from the perspective of my project the difficulty it raises is practical, not theoretical. I am perfectly happy to concede that, from an American perspective, say, reading novels only about the American colonial experience is not nearly enough.5

A third objection, again raised by Scarry, is that works of fiction as such cannot be of much use when it comes to getting on with complicated projects in the real world. The reason, as she puts it, is that, “[m]ore often than not,” fiction lacks “any anchor in historical reality” (Nussbaum et al. 1996, 104). In one sense, this claim is trivially true: most novels are not works of historical fiction. However, the underlying idea is that novels tend to be disconnected from particular social and historical contexts in ways that allow readers to get away from the worlds they really inhabit, to leave them behind at least for a time.

But does the claim that fiction is escapist have bite? Surely all reading is escapist in the minimal sense that the decision to sit down and read is a decision

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5 The connection to cosmopolitan education is clear.
temporarily to suspend one’s other activities in the world. No one wants to suggest
on this basis that we ought to be skeptical of reading’s value. The question then
must be whether fiction in particular entails a more extreme form of escapism that
has bad consequences for positive, prosocial action in the world, perhaps by not
equipping us to act successfully with and for others, or by simulating social worlds
that are irrelevant to the social worlds we really inhabit.⁶

There are at least two reasons to think that novels are usually not escapist in
this bad sense. First, even works of high fantasy are necessarily reliant on a good
deal of quite normal psychological and social principles (e.g., what particular
gestures or facial expressions mean, what expectations are associated with
particular social roles, etc.). This reliance is not a logical necessity but a practical
one: if the world and characters of the fantasy were absolutely foreign and operated
in radically new ways relative to the reader’s lived experience, the reader would not
be able to understand the story at all and the story would fail.⁷ From this
perspective, the aspects of the story that make it most obviously “fantastic” are
recognized as such in (perhaps subconscious) comparison to familiar states of
affairs. This gives us reason to think that stories that are unrealistic in some ways
can still convey useful social knowledge to their readers.

A second way to respond to this objection is to say that, in some cases,
breaking with reality is not a liability but an asset, because doing so invites readers

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⁶ On simulating social worlds, see Mar and Oatley (2008).
⁷ For related discussions, see Mar et al. (2006) and Neblo (n.d.).
to explore new ways of being and acting in the world. Neblo (n.d.) makes precisely this claim about magical realist novels, arguing that they are able—in ways other genres are not—to stimulate the process of identity-recreation after the experience of trauma. He claims that “[t]he realist moment roots us in the only authentic place to begin, and thus expresses a kind of fidelity to a painful past, even as the magical elements seek to re-appropriate that past” (ibid., 3). The idea is that recovery from trauma—including a large-scale social trauma like colonialism—is in large part about reorientation, about asking questions like: What happened to me/us? Who are we now? How do we go on from here, and where do we go? Answering these questions requires some degree of new thinking, and stories that offer the same old world with the same constraints and the same possibilities will be of limited use. Magical realist novels, then, precisely by partially breaking with the world as it is, might actually be “necessary for successfully reconstructing the relationship between individual and collective identity in the aftermath of trauma…” (ibid., 5).

Of course, magical realism is not the only genre capable of generating creative, transformative insights. Richard Rorty appropriates the Bloomian figure of the strong poet to characterize the writer who creates a distinctive vocabulary that lets us talk about and understand the world in new, compelling ways. In his view one important function of literature—by which he means not just novels (let alone just magical realist novels) but also poetry, ethnographies, criticism, etc.—is to “help us attend to the springs of cruelty in ourselves, as well as to the fact of its occurrence in areas where we had not noticed it” (1989, 95). Reading “detailed descriptions of
particular varieties of pain and humiliation” (ibid., 192) that people perpetrated and suffered under colonialism can impress us in a way that a merely academic discussion of the mechanics of colonization may not.

Reading more novels about colonialism can help us generate, to use Scarry’s term, more “generous imaginings” of distant others (Nussbaum et al. 1996, 105). Reading more novels can also help us see the common elements that bind diverse colonial experiences together. To be sure, reading alone is not enough to guarantee the success of the project I have advocated here. But it represents one very simple, low-cost way to start appreciating the history of colonialism as a global story, and so represents an important step toward achieving global solidarity.

Conclusion

How can global solidarity be achieved? Habermas conceptualizes the task as stimulating a learning process (2008b, 451), and I have argued here that the recognition of a common history is an important stage in this process. We should not wait and hope that human rights eventually become sufficiently motivating. Rather, we—public officials, public intellectuals, and citizens—can actively participate in the public thematization of the global history of colonialism. We can debate the lessons to be learned and the policy responses that should be adopted. Perhaps this historical project is not the answer for a deficient solidarity, but it is part of the answer, and a part that we too often and too quickly dismiss. To the
extent that increasing agreement on the colonial history that binds the world together stimulates greater mutual recognition and greater solidarity, the international community can hope for increasingly effective engagement on the important global political problems that have so far resisted resolution.
References


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