



Jared Holley

Recovering the Anticolonial Roots of Solidarity

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Author

Abstract

1	Introduction	3
2	Theorizing Solidarity	5
3	Historicizing Solidarity	9
4	Globalizing Solidarity	11
5	Towards a Theory of Anticolonial Solidarity	15

References

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to critically reorient us to the received ways of thinking about solidarity today. I begin by arguing that discussions of solidarity in analytical political theory cannot adequately account for contemporary practices of anticolonial solidarity. These theories present a false choice: either solidarity is a rigidly “symmetrical” relationship, which rules out the kinds of transnational solidarity typical of anticolonial social movements; or solidarity is an “asymmetrical” relationship of “deference”, which rules out the emphasis on autonomy central to anticolonial solidarity. I then turn to the conceptual history of solidarity, juxtaposing the work of Léon Bourgeois and Anténor Firmin to distinguish a “hegemonic” from a “counter-hegemonic” form of solidarity. Firmin’s critique of what he called “European solidarity” and his alternative anticolonial model better account for contemporary practices of anticolonial solidarity. Recovering them both clears critical theoretical space and responds to, while reciprocally supporting, ongoing practices of anticolonial solidarity today.

1 INTRODUCTION ¹

“History is there to remind the ignorant and the forgetful of the truth” (Firmin 2002: 348).

On 7 January 2020, militarized Canadian police descended onto unceded Gitdimt’en Clan territories of the Wet’suwet’en First Nation in the north-western central interior of what is now called British Columbia (BC). Their stated aim was to enforce a colonial court injunction supporting the

construction of a 670-kilometer pipeline that would carry fracked gas to a proposed processing plant, to be owned and operated by LNG Canada, the single largest private investment in Canadian history. Each clan within the Wet’suwet’en Nation have full jurisdiction under their law to control access to their territory. Peaceful women and elders were faced with heavy assault rifles and the full colonial violence of a state invasion on unceded territories. Fourteen land defenders were arrested, including Gitdimt’en Clan spokesperson Molly Wickham.

On 17 February 2020, activists in Berlin gathered outside the Canadian Embassy in response to the Wet’suwet’en Chiefs’ “international call to solidarity” (Hereditary Chiefs 2020). The demonstration was organized by the Berlin Aboriginal Solidarity Network, and included Canadian expatriates, local comrades, and curious passers-by. Their presence, they wrote, was intended as a “demand” that the Canadian government uphold their obligations under international law. But it was also meant to “implore” the world to wake up to the ongoing colonial genocide in Canada; and to “acknowledge” the global interdependence of all nations affected by large-scale corporate resource extraction. They were peaceful and not especially confrontational. It was in many ways a typical anticolonial solidarity action: linking Berlin and BC transnationally and turning “anger” and “anxiety into action” locally through “collective and international solidarity” (Berlin Aboriginal Solidarity Network 2020).

This working paper takes the Embassy demonstration as an opportunity to reflect on the limits of some of the major approaches to solidarity in

¹ Acknowledgements: My thanks to Andreas Eckert, Sebastian Conrad, Stefan Gosepath, Robin Celikates, and Birte Löschenkohl for helpful comments on previous drafts, and to audiences at Gießen, Cambridge, and Berlin for discussions of some of the paper’s main themes.

political theory and the history of political thought. I begin by suggesting that the recent debate about solidarity in analytical political theory is unable to account for the kind of anticolonial solidarity practiced that day in Berlin. The debate is limited insofar as it presents a false choice: either solidarity is a rigidly “symmetrical” relationship, which rules out the kinds of transnational solidarity typical of anticolonial social movements; or solidarity is an “asymmetrical” relationship of “deference”, which rules out the emphasis on individual and group autonomy central to the theory and practice of anticolonial solidarity. To further test the limits of these theories, I then turn to their most prominent historical precursor. French statesman Léon Bourgeois developed an account of solidarity that, especially in his international thought, effectively legitimized nineteenth-century practices of European colonialism. Contemporary political theorists who return to Bourgeois are certainly not doomed to repeat his mistakes. But we must take care to account for these colonial blind spots.

This critical theoretical and historical survey clears the ground for my central contribution: the recovery of Anténor Firmin’s anticolonial critique of what he called “European solidarity”. Firmin was a Haitian philosopher and diplomat whose “The Equality of the Human Races” was published in 1885, the same year that European heads of state agreed to a coordinated colonial strategy at the Berlin African Conference. He argued that appeals to solidarity among Europe’s political and intellectual elite were grounded in an uncritical belief in the inherent superiority of the white over the black race, and that this racist and Eurocentric concept of solidarity was, in turn, used to legitimize colonialism. Historians and political theorists have forgotten Firmin, in part because they have also largely forgotten that solidarity’s conceptual history was always (already) a global and anticolonial one. From the perspective of the received history, Firmin appears as a lonely figure. But contextualizing his theoretical work as part of

his radical political practice clarifies how it both emerged from and informed his participation in transnational anticolonial solidarity networks. Recovering the view he shared with and practiced alongside more famous anticolonial leaders like José Martí and W. E. B. Du Bois, I argue, helps to critically reorient us to our ordinary ways of understanding solidarity and, thereby, to the problems and possibilities of building solidarity across difference today. This is one way for political theorists to respond to and engage dialogically with contemporary practices of anticolonial solidarity.

I should clarify from the outset my use of the language of “roots”. On the one hand, this working paper is not an attempt to recover an anticolonial meaning of solidarity that should be thought of as somehow “original” or “essential”. Rather, my aim is to demonstrate, first, that anticolonial thinkers used the concept of solidarity to critique European imperialism contemporaneously with and even before the emergence of what are now considered the classical accounts of solidarity in late 19th-century French social theory. This shows, second, that what we have received as the standard intellectual history of solidarity in fact overshadowed or even displaced anticolonial uses of the concept. To correct the record is, in this sense, to recover the historical roots of anticolonial solidarity. On the other hand, precisely those forgotten accounts present anticolonialism as the necessary foundation of any wider attempt to build solidarity across difference. They show that not only did Firmin critique the appeals to solidarity amongst the European intellectual and political elite as little more than ideological legitimations of colonialism, he also developed a theory and practice of solidarity that would link local struggles against colonial domination transnationally or globally. To recover that praxis is, in this sense, to recover a concept of solidarity rooted in anticolonialism.

2 THEORIZING SOLIDARITY

Relative to concepts like justice, there are few systematic treatments of solidarity in contemporary political theory. More often, solidarity is invoked to engage with particular social movements or ongoing crises (Shelby 2009; Balibar 2010; Habermas 2017). While some theorists discuss solidarity, they disagree fundamentally about its relationship to other central value-concepts that are no less disputed. Some argue that solidarity should replace the emphasis on toleration in liberal political theory because solidarity allows us to think about actively overcoming the oppositional relationship between self and other, rather than merely (passively) mitigating its worst aspects (Dean 1996; Dussel 2004). Avowedly liberal theorists disagree about whether a commitment to act in solidarity with others enables or inhibits individual liberty, insofar as one is not at liberty to refuse such a commitment (i.e., Dallmyr 2015). Even those united in calling for a more “democratic” form of solidarity disagree about the grounds of equality it would presuppose and support, with suggestions ranging from human nature, or human rights, to mutual suffering, nationality, or membership of voluntary associations like trade unions (Honneth 2011; Young 2002). As one writer sums up this diversity of opinion: “the phenomenon of solidarity lies like an erratic block of stone in the moral landscape of modernity” (Bayertz 1999: 9).

One of the most promising means of chipping away at the “stone” is to think about solidarity in relation to political action. Analytic political theorists Andrea Sangiovanni (2015, 2021) and Avery Kolers (2014, 2016) both suggest that solidarity is intrinsically related to actions through which agents attempt collectively to redress the effects of injustice or to contest the structures of domination that produce and sustain them. It is helpful to contrast their approaches. For although neither addresses anticolonialism directly, bringing

out their similarities and differences clarifies a range of theoretical dilemmas that can frame an investigation of the conceptual history of anticolonial solidarity.

The first crucial point of disagreement between them concerns the nature and grounds of solidarity – what it is, and why we (ought to) pursue it. For Sangiovanni, solidarity is (1) a particular mode of action, (2) grounded in reasons derived from mutual interdependence, and (3) partly constituted by the aim that orients it. His account is helpful because it allows us to clearly distinguish between different types of solidarity. So, the grounds of socialist solidarity are reasons derived from a shared experience of exploitation and joint social production, and it aims to overthrow capitalism. The grounds of feminist solidarity similarly derive from an opposition to and struggle against injustice, with the aim of overcoming patriarchy. For Kolers, by contrast, while solidarity is importantly linked to collective action, it is not itself a distinct mode of action. Rather, it is (1) a moral attitude or disposition. As such, it is (2) able to be cultivated outside of or prior to political action and (3) not constituted by any specific practical aim. In feminist solidarity, then, agents are disposed to join with others in a common struggle against the injustice of patriarchy, irrespective of the concrete aim of their action. Prioritizing disposition over action in this way yields a capacious account of solidarity. This by design, for Kolers aims to shift the object of investigation from the descriptive question “is this or that action one of solidarity?” to the normative question “ought I to join in solidarity with these or those others?”. Thus, white nationalism grounded in claims of racial superiority is not what Paul Gilroy (2000: 6) calls a kind of cheap “pseudo-solidarity” – for Kolers, solidarity with Nazis is “morally wrong, but it is solidarity” (Kolers 2016: 6).

This debate is largely silent on anticolonialism.² But it nevertheless provides a framework in which to pose the question: what is anticolonial solidarity? As the most perspicuous account on offer, Sangiovanni invites us to ask if anticolonial solidarity is in fact a distinct type of solidarity.³ Can we identify grounds sufficient to distinguish it from other types? Or are the reasons we might have for engaging in anticolonial solidarity better understood as being analogous or even reducible to reasons of another type, such as those stemming from capitalist exploitation? Is it a particular mode of action, or a disposition to be cultivated prior to acting? Would “overcoming colonialism” suffice to identify the aim of such action, or is further specification required, such as self-determination, reparations, or the return of (stolen) land?⁴

A second point of recent disagreement is over the relations of interdependence that characterize agents of solidarity actions. For Sangiovanni, solidarity requires agents to be situated

2 Sangiovanni (2021: 45-47) does however note that “social movements” constitute a distinct “school of thought” about solidarity, arguing that the same concept of solidarity is applicable to all social movements. What differs among them is their respective views of the “grounds and object of solidaristic action”: feminism is grounded in opposition to patriarchy, the black nationalist movement is grounded in “sharing a way of life centered on shared history, mores, and folkways” but, in both, solidarity itself “refers to the mutual sacrifice and joint action demanded by an identification with one another on the basis of a way of life, condition, role, set of experiences, or cause”.

3 Importantly, Sangiovanni addresses only the in-group solidarity grounded in interdependence of the oppressed (i.e. women or black nationalists), without considering what Scholz (2012: 150-87) calls “the paradox of the participation of the privileged” (i.e. the non-oppressed “joiner”). My argument could be seen as an attempt to test the limits of Sangiovanni’s framework by placing it in dialogue with the history and present of anticolonial movements that, as I argue below, emphasize its necessarily transnational orientation and constitutive concern with precisely such “out-group” solidarity. On this, see Gould’s (2007) account of “overlapping solidarity networks”. Cf. Medina’s (2013: 250-312) account of “radical solidarity”.

4 The question of whether we ought to think of this as “stolen” property arises because territorial conquest was the historical precondition of the establishment of property relations in which the very idea of “theft” can begin to make theoretical and practical sense (Nichols 2020).

symmetrically when they act jointly to achieve a concrete aim. Examples of interdependencies are those of worker and factory owner, the individual and the family, nations with one another, or of each human being’s mutual dependence on God. The recognition of these relations creates a “latent” unity among the agents. But solidarity requires, further, the “organization” of that unity in and through joint action. Crucially, for this joint action to be one of solidarity requires symmetry across four conditions: those of intention, commitment, a disposition to share fates, and trust (Sangiovanni 2015: 343).⁵

The symmetry condition is crucial because it is the basis on which Sangiovanni denies that transnational practices like those at the Berlin demonstration constitute solidarity. If applied rigorously, then it would rule out, for instance, the possibility of Europeans acting in solidarity with refugees or with women’s rights protests in the middle east (Sangiovanni 2021: 20-21).⁶ In my example, this implies that both the hereditary chiefs and the activists were confused. Because the disposition to share fates between them could never be genuinely symmetrical, the chiefs’ call for international solidarity was, in fact, either incoherent or impossible; and the demonstrators

5 (1) Each agent intends to do their part in advancing a shared goal. (2) Each agent is individually committed (a) to the realization of the shared goal and (b) to not bypassing each other’s will in the achievement of the goal. (3) Each agent is disposed to share one another’s fates in ways relevant to the shared goal. (4) Agents trust each other to play their part in advancing the shared goal in ways that are responsive, trust each other’s commitment, and trust the other’s disposition to share our fate.

6 This working paper was written before Sangiovanni’s most recent account. He now concedes that Europeans acting “in the name of refugees” can be a form of “latent” solidarity, if that action fulfils two conditions: it must be “geared toward and make room for the participation of refugees where and when this is possible. It must be designed to enable their participation in a truly collective agency. At the same time, they must welcome our action and do what they can, within their constrained conditions, to organize and coordinate with us” (2021: 53; citing discussion in Owen 2021). This development in his account is very welcome, as it is the most fruitful means of including the rich history and present of anticolonial solidarity between indigenous and non-indigenous settlers, both locally and transnationally.

responding to that call were not, in fact, acting in solidarity. In this way, insisting on symmetry of action and disposition introduces a stark epistemic asymmetry, a “break” (Celikates 2018) between the political theorist and the agents whose practices she describes or attempts to take into account. Political theorists should not simply adopt ordinary language uses of solidarity – as I have indicated, the ordinary language of solidarity is contested, perhaps even confused. But we can and should do more than police the use of the concept, not least because of the tendency to paternalism that, we will see below, pervades the discipline’s history.

Perhaps Kolers’ theory is better suited to make sense of solidarity practices like the action at the Canadian Embassy in Berlin. He sees solidarity as a distinctively asymmetrical relationship of “deference”. His account is unique and potentially valuable because it focusses on the perspective of what he calls the “joiner”. In his model, a privileged agent “responds” to a “call” from the “oppressed” and joins with them in solidarity. Because solidarity is dispositional, the agent sides with oppressed prior to and irrespective of any goal or aim having been specified. Crucially, Kolers insists that their relationship is asymmetrical insofar as the joiner is disposed to defer to the oppressed in the subsequent identification and formulation of the goal or aim of action. Perhaps anticolonial solidarity is not a particular mode of action, but a disposition to join with others. Indeed, Kolers’ examples are intriguing: Bartolomé de las Casas was disposed to defer to Amerindians struggling against Spanish imperialism, who were not symmetrically disposed to defer to him; nineteenth-century white abolitionists were disposed to defer to Black slaves, who were not symmetrically disposed to defer to them. On his terms, las Casas and abolitionists are joiners who act in solidarity as the “understudy” or “surrogate” of the oppressed. For Sangiovanni, such asymmetry in disposition means that agents can

at best exhibit “sympathy with” or “support for” a cause. Surrogacy is not solidarity.

Thinking of solidarity as a relationship of deference appears to address a core dilemma of anti-colonial solidarity – namely, the possibility of solidarity between the colonized and members of settler or imperial societies. It allows us to see the Embassy activists as responding to the call of the oppressed, with whom they sided and thus joined in solidarity. And yet – are the activists rightly understood as deferring to the Wet’suwet’en in the subsequent formulation of their action? Kolers rejects the joiner’s “autonomy” in order to prioritize relations of “equity” with the oppressed, hoping to rescue a “liberal” account of solidarity from familiar critiques of individualist bias in neo-Kantian moral theory. But the Wet’suwet’en “call to solidarity” suggests that one way for joiners to “build solidarity” is to “form a supporter group in your local community, and brainstorm what you can do as a collective” (Berlin Aboriginal Solidarity Network 2020; cf. Gould 2007: 157; Taiwo 2021). That is, they explicitly “call” on joiners not to defer but, rather, to exercise the autonomy that Kolers denies. Indeed, his insistence on dispositional asymmetry also accepts an epistemic break: it posits an ideal voice in which the oppressed make their call, breaking from the empirical realities of conflict and disagreement characteristic of social movements; and it suggests that the privileged joiners hear this ideal voice and suppress their own agency, declining to enter into genuine dialogue.⁷ This suggests that deference solidarity risks reproducing the “anti-democratic” asymmetry of what Ofelia Schutte (1993: 159–60) called the “fusion model of solidarity”, in which authentic

7 In ongoing work, I put this dispute into conversation with a similar one in the tradition of critical theory. For a helpful way in, compare Young 1997 and Benhabib 1991. For solidarity and symmetry, see Honneth 1996: 128–9; Jaeggi 2001. For an emphasis on the asymmetrical nature of solidarity, cf. Mohanty 2003: 193, 240. For an intriguing discussion of “asymmetrical risk” in transnational solidarity, see Gawerc 2017. Cf. Medina’s (2013: 17, 197) discussion of stand-point theory’s “asymmetry thesis”.



Fig. 1 Bentwood Box, 2002 | Canadian Embassy, Berlin



Fig. 2 Red Dress | Canadian Embassy, Berlin

solidarity “is based on self-erasure and submission to the authority of the oppressed other”. At the very least, it highlights a neglect of real politics in what Kolers somewhat oddly refers to as an “agonistic” but avowedly “moral theory” of solidarity (Kolers 2016: 38-48).

Following an alternative tradition of “agonist” and “realist” theorists, I think that these theoretical disagreements are best resolved by turning to practices of solidarity (Tully 1999). We need a theory of solidarity that can make sense of anticolonial practices such as those at the Embassy demonstration. At a minimum, our theory should not disqualify such practices in advance. Yet the recent debate about relations of interdependence – as either symmetrical or asymmetrical – reveals a further question about how best to describe the relationship between theory and practice in (anticolonial) solidarity. In this context, it helps to emphasize the importance of critical practices of historical memory to contemporary anticolonial solidarity actions (cf. Traverso 2017).

That day in Berlin, demonstrators reached the action via a public walkway affording them a view of Kwakiutl carver Calvin Hunt’s Bentwood Box, 2002 (Fig. 1), prominently displayed outward to pedestrians from the Embassy’s interior. Exiting the walkway and arriving at the demonstration, they joined a young woman, who later identified herself as Métis, holding a “solidarity with Wet’suwet’en” banner and a distinctive red dress (Fig. 2).

Bentwood boxes are sometimes used in state reconciliation ceremonies, and Embassy literature celebrates the walkway as an innovative architectural feature that, by showcasing this “integrated art”, “reflects Canada’s dynamic identity” (McLuhan Salon 2021). The red dress became a famous symbol through the REDress Project, which artist Jamie Black described as “an aesthetic response to the more than 1000 missing and murdered Aboriginal women in Canada” (Black 2020). Through this artistic juxtaposition, the solidarity action effectively reframed the history of settler-indigenous relations officially promoted by the Embassy.

It laid bare the walkway's art as less a reflection of multicultural reconciliation and more an aesthetic projection to an international audience of the Canadian state's legitimacy claims. Insofar as such claims rely on and reinforce a "constitutive" or "deliberate forgetting" of modern imperialism (Bell 2008; Peters 2020), it staged a reminder or counter-history that highlighted the "historical-structural" injustice (Nutti 2019) of ongoing colonial genocide in Canada (cf. Thompson 2001; Spinner-Halev 2007).

The following sections provide a different sort of reminder, turning from contemporary Berlin to the history of political thought to recover the anticolonial roots of solidarity. French statesman Léon Bourgeois' account of solidarity remains foundational to the received intellectual history of solidarity regularly deployed by political theorists. Reconstructing it thus further tests the limits of our current ways of seeing solidarity by, first, revealing how they came to predominate. It also, second, provides a way of seeing solidarity against which other views can then be compared. A reading of Haitian statesman Anténor Firmin recovers an account of anticolonial solidarity attuned to the differences of race, place, and nation that arise in the kinds of social movements that responded to the Wet'suwet'en call for solidarity. And because he was not only a theorist but also, and even primarily, a radical political actor, Firmin's account also helps to clarify precisely this final question of *praxis* in anticolonial solidarity.

3 HISTORICIZING SOLIDARITY

In the context of industrialization, demographic shift, and rising inequality, solidarity first gained widespread appeal as a concept with which to explain and address the centrifugal forces of the division of labor in modern society. While Émile Durkheim is the best-known early theorist of solidarity, his contemporary Léon Bourgeois was far

more influential. A French statesman who briefly served as Prime Minister and was one of the primary architects of the League of Nations, his 1895 pamphlet *Solidarité* was the intellectual foundation of the political movement "solidarism", which has been called "the official social philosophy of the French Third Republic" (Hayward 1961, 1958).

Contemporary political theorists and historians are returning to Bourgeois with increasing regularity. Sangiovanni aims to "make sense of solidarity's history" because "the historical, political, and social uses of solidarity have formed the concept into a practice" (Sangiovanni 2021: 28). Like the leading historians of solidarity (Blais 2007, 2014; Brunkhorst 2002; Fiegle 2003; Kohn 2019), he emphasizes two aspects of Bourgeois' thought that support a social democratic vision of distributive justice and increasing social solidarity through robust national welfare states. The first is Bourgeois' view of contemporary inequalities as the accumulated product of joint social production in the division of labor over time. The second follows from this temporal perspective: we are born into society owing a "social debt" to both past generations and our contemporaries. To specify the content of this debt at a given moment, Bourgeois devised a thought experiment he called the "quasi-contract". One reason for his contemporary appeal is the proximity of this idea to John Rawls' famous "original position". Long before Rawls, Bourgeois suggested that we should imagine what distribution of the benefits and burdens of social interdependence we would agree to if we were free and equal members of a contract prior to our association. This thought experiment then provides a normative standard against which to evaluate social institutions and which guides policies for their reform (Bourgeois 1902: 136-40).⁸

⁸ Rawls identifies the difference principle with "fraternity" (1999: 90-91).

As an active social campaigner and political leader, Bourgeois always emphasized the practical implications of his theory. The great strength of solidarity, he argued, was its orientation to overcoming economic and social inequality. In the language of August Comte's positivism, Bourgeois called solidarity a "materialist" concept, devoid of the "metaphysical" trappings of the older idea of fraternity, which it ought therefore to replace in an updated Radical Republican triad (Comte 1883: 100-01). But solidarity was also in some sense a new master concept – rather than merely sit alongside the principles of liberty and equality, it presupposed and expressed their existence and unity. It was also explicitly intended to replace prevailing Christian notions of charity. This is crucial, for charity is like deference insofar as both are asymmetrical relationships – indeed, the insistence on symmetry in contemporary political theory is often articulated in terms of the need to distinguish solidarity from charity (Jaeggi 2001: 291). It is thus worth noting how Bourgeois understood that distinction, and how it relates to his concern with solidarity's practical orientation.

In this and other respects, Bourgeois saw himself as developing Alfred Fouillée's theory of modern society as a "contractual regime". Fouillée described his work as "liberalism pushed to its highest degree" and "socialism rightly understood", arguing that "the very path of freedom is a social organization where all the parties are in solidarity" (Fouillée 1880: 420-21). According to Fouillée, charity could not address the stark social inequalities produced by industrial society. Instead, modern citizens needed to recognize the duty of what he called "reparative justice". Whereas charity was an asymmetrical duty of the rich to relieve the suffering of the poor, reparative justice was symmetrical, a duty of each to repair the historically rooted contemporary injustices felt by all (Fouillée 1880: 325ff., 357-62). Bourgeois saw his idea of the social debt as developing Fouillée's reparative justice in a more practical direction. He

steadfastly rejected the neo-Kantian language of "duty" as far too abstract, repeatedly defending his choice of 'debt' precisely because of its concrete grounding in real inequalities (Bourgeois 1902: 106ff; cf. Stock-Morton 1988: 109ff.). With the idea of social debt at its core, then, Bourgeois' view of solidarity is distinguished from charity because it is material and historical. That is, the ground of our obligation to redress contemporary inequality is not an abstract and timeless ideal of justice or moral equality, as in neo-Kantian theory. Rather, the obligation to repair injustice is an obligation to repay a debt, as material inequalities are the legacy of joint social production through history.

Of course, the quasi-contract thought experiment means that Bourgeois responded to contemporary injustice by abstracting away from its real historical roots. Indeed, despite his initial theoretical emphasis on material interdependence and historical injustice, he never addressed the French empire or colonialism in his discussions of solidarity.⁹ There is a striking discrepancy in the use to which he put his theory of solidarity in the national and international contexts, respectively. Whereas he presents solidarity as a veritable panacea for whatever social ills might beset modern France, solidarity has a relatively limited role in his account of international society. But already in 1899 – well before he became the first president of the League of Nations – he was arguing that a growing recognition of the "ever-closer economic solidarity of nations" had made "world peace" a real possibility. All that was needed was for a "society of nations" to actualize this latent unity by organizing and defining the common material, economic, intellectual, and moral interests of modern, civilized states. As this language suggests, the historical element of solidarity returns to Bourgeois' international thought via his

⁹ We might see Bourgeois as presaging Rawls in these respects, too (e. g. Mills 2015).

commitment to the nineteenth-century discourse of “civilization” (Bowden 2009). Distinguishing the modern civilized from the pre-modern uncivilized, he saw international legislation as creating a domain of equality “open to all civilized states”, which it would “envelop” in a “network of peace”. He celebrated the 1907 International Convention of Arbitration in the same terms, as affirming what, in this context, he was willing to call the “duty of solidarity” that applied “between civilized peoples”. By the time he discussed the Balkan Crisis of 1913, it was clear that his real concern was with “the great powers” acting on “the solidarity of their permanent interests” (Bourgeois 1913: 22, 40, 62-3, 228-9, 239-40. cf. 80, 122, 127, 135-6, 187).

The contemporary implications of returning to Bourgeois are thus somewhat uncertain. For him, solidarity is a feature of societies that have reached that state of civilizational development at which the fair distribution of the benefits and burdens of the social division of labor becomes the central political problem. If it applies between societies, it does so only between those who have reached a similar state and, even then, only minimally. We saw that even the most helpful contemporary accounts of solidarity are unable to account for transnational practices of anticolonial solidarity. That they are rooted in a genealogy starting with Bourgeois does not necessarily commit them to his philosophy of history and exclusionary discourse of civilization. They may, however, risk reproducing a picture of solidarity as limited to the interests of powerful actors in a global order that remains structured by colonialism. For his part, Bourgeois placed his work in a longer genealogy: solidarity, he argued, must be understood as “the development of the philosophy of the eighteenth-century, and the culmination of the social and political theory of the French Revolution” (Bourgeois 1902: 156). While the Revolution retains its hold over the Western political imaginary, we have also learned from

the critique of its restricted application of purportedly universal values of liberty, equality, fraternity. That critique is typically associated with thinkers like Wollstonecraft or Marx. But similar lessons are increasingly being drawn from that ‘other’ Atlantic revolution in Haiti. The past few decades have seen a resurgence of interest in the Haitian Revolution as a genuinely radical attempt to advance “another universalism” and inaugurate a world order stripped of both slavery and colonialism (Getachew 2016). The following section extends that critique to the idea of solidarity. Turning to the Haitian diplomat and philosopher Anténor Firmin, it also contributes to ongoing efforts to undo the “epistemic disavowal” of the Haitian Revolution (Bhambra 2016; Trouillot 1995). For as we will see, Firmin was but one of several of Bourgeois’ contemporaries who developed and pursued alternative praxes of solidarity in anticolonial movements oriented transnationally and globally.

4 GLOBALIZING SOLIDARITY

Ten years before Bourgeois’ pamphlet on solidarity first appeared, Firmin devoted a chapter of his 1885 *Equality of the Human Races* (EHR) to showing how the connection between solidarity and civilization was being used to legitimate European colonialism. Firmin’s reception has been a rocky one. As Andreas Eckert has aptly noted, “it is one of the most irritating findings in the history of political thought that Firmin’s voice was almost completely ignored for well over a century” (Eckert 2021). The recent upsurge of interest in him as a “Haitian pioneer of anthropology” and in his text as a refutation of Arthur de Gobineau’s *Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races* (1855) is a welcome corrective (Fluehr-Lobban 2000).¹⁰ But

¹⁰ This upsurge of interest has been aided in no small part by the first English translation of Firmin spearheaded by Fluehr-Lobban (2002).

EHR cannot be reduced to a mere “anti-Gobineau” treatise. For not only was Gobineau then far less influential than he would later become but Firmin essentially dismissed him, writing that his specious arguments for the innate inequality of the races would be rejected by any “connoisseur of history” (Firmin 2002: 139; cf. Bernasconi 2008). Nor can Firmin be reduced to a forerunner of the nascent discipline of anthropology: as a thinker, he provided a forceful critique of the racist foundations of European imperial solidarity; and as a radical political actor, he developed and pursued alternative anticolonial models of transnational solidarity. In order to recover Firmin’s perspective, the following section sticks rather closely to his own words. This allows me to contribute to the belated amplification of his voice, without flattening its sharply political tone.

Firmin’s understanding of solidarity shares much with that of Bourgeois. The beneficiary of an elite education in Haiti, he was well versed in ancient and modern classics. Their common starting point was a rejection of the foundational premise of modern political thought – against the Epicurean-Hobbesian idea that humans naturally have neither a tendency to form social groups nor an ability to establish durable moral consensus prior to or outside the coercive structure of the state, he reverted to the older idea of “natural sociability” (c.f. Holley 2018; Hont 2005). Firmin distinguished between “natural” and “social” solidarity, with the former providing the “source” of the latter. In his *Letters from Saint Thomas* (1910), he cites Proudhon to argue that “the starting point of all animal and above all human solidarity is symmetry, the basis of the union of male and female, man and woman, when it is provoked by a sentimental or reasonable attraction, beauty or morality” (Firmin 1910: 290-1). He explained that humans have basic needs for the development of their individual personality and for “solidarity and social cohesion”; and he celebrated Fouillée – “the great and perceptive philosopher” – for demonstrating

that “these two simultaneous effects of progress, which at first were thought to be contrary, will really be inseparable: the growth of individual life and the growth of social life” (Firmin 1910: 210). Indeed, he also approved Bourgeois’ “sympathetic” and “beautiful” account of “the development of individualities destined to harmonize in the higher task of working together in the common work of progress” (Firmin 1910: 226).

As this language suggests, Firmin adopted the ideas of historical progress and civilization common to his intellectual context. But in applying Comte’s framework to anthropological questions, he also extended the anticolonialism that distinguished French from English positivism (Comte 1877: 430–31, 364; cf. Fillafer 2020). He divided “the human community” into “civilized nations and savage or barbarian peoples”, or “advanced groups and backward ones”. The distinction, he noted, relied on an “ideal of the civilized state” according to which each national community could be judged as “endowed with a superior or inferior civilization depending on its level of sociological development” (Firmin 2002: 449). The problem, then, was not “the concept of civilization” itself but the way that “Europeans usurp” that concept. On his terms, Europeans had debased the “beautiful and scientific ideal” of civilization by yoking it to the “colonizing lust” for larger territories. Firmin saw Europe’s imperial expansion as fundamentally an economic phenomenon rooted in a vulgar “materialism” and the quest for the “accumulation of wealth”, especially that “which has an exchange value and is immediately useable” (Firmin 2002: 389). On his view, the European intellectual and political elite had conspired together in a colonial project designed to meet “the need of major industrialized nations for constantly expanding spheres of activity and markets” (Firmin 2002: 384).

Firmin identifies the doctrine of racial inequality as the lynchpin of modern colonialist ideology. As

with progress and civilization, neither did Firmin question the concept of race: he writes freely of the white and black races; he never accuses others of racism; he diligently exposes arguments as unscientific or unphilosophical rather than racist. For Firmin, race was a fluid category because racial differences were socially and historically determined (Beckett 2017). The bulk of *EHR* is devoted to demonstrating that the theory of racial inequality cannot be supported by empirical observation and that all races are naturally equal in their potential for sociological progress and civilizational development. But in the final chapters, Firmin announces a shift to asking *why* this “obsolete and antiscientific” belief continues to find widespread acceptance (Firmin 2002: 377). The main cause he identifies, the “one particular source of error”, is colonialism: “the pervasive influence of European aspirations and attending policies of invasion and usurpation, which are fueled mainly by the spirit of domination and arrogant faith in the superiority of the Caucasian man” (Firmin 2002: 384). Europeans “unite to dominate the rest of the world” because they “unanimously recognize... the White race” both as superior and as possessed of the “mission of dominating the other races” to promote and “maintain civilization”. In a text published the same year as the Berlin Africa Conference at which European powers agreed to coordinate their colonial projects, he asks, “does not the question of race lie at the core of these outbursts of solidarity” (Firmin 2002: 387). Conceptual and territorial usurpation went hand in hand.

Centering Firmin’s account of European solidarity in a reading of *EHR* suggests that we see him as engaged in a kind of ideology critique. He argues that the exercise of political power in “modern civilization” has come to require “moral and scientific justification”. Without a “justifying reason” to “legitimize” moral and political conduct, modern individuals suffer debilitating guilt. The obvious material and cultural superiority of Europe

combines with this need for legitimation to generate a “sort of unconscious fascination with European achievements” among “scholars and scientists”, who “unconsciously internalize” the “popular view” of racial inequality: “declining to submit what has become a doctrine to any systematic critique”, Firmin writes, “they seek merely to justify it (Firmin 2002: 389, 383). By revealing racial inequality as false, he sought to demonstrate that Europeans who speak the language of “eternal justice and truth” are trapped in a “hypocritical” situation of self-contradiction. Because colonialism is “inconsistent with” or even “negates” the “moral temper of the century”, they “resort to casuistry and the arbitrary interpretation of facts to justify their actions” (Firmin 2002: 383). With the very ideas invoked to legitimate colonization and subjugation of other races, then, Europeans render themselves “victims of an illusion” (Firmin 2002: 450). In this way, Firmin presents racial inequality as what we would call an ideology in the fullest sense (Geuss 1981: 4-26): a false belief that, in legitimating European practices of colonization, brings those who hold it into contradiction with the values they otherwise purport to hold and, thereby, into a condition of unfreedom.¹¹

One of the more intriguing elements of Firmin’s critique is his use of history to move his readers from the error of racial superiority to the truth of racial equality. *EHR* is prefaced with a caution about “the study of the past” for present purposes. “Historical comparisons” can be given a “rational foundation” only if they are used to demonstrate that historical progress from barbarism to civilization is long and uneven, an evolutionary process of “trial and error”. But history is a “dangerous” tool, for it so often fulfils ideological

11 For more recent discussions of race, racism, and racial inferiority as ideology, see Fields/Fields 2014 and Haslanger 2017. These accounts importantly differ from the one Firmin presents, at least in *EHR*, in their shared emphasis on ideology as practice: see, for instance, Fields’ distinction between ideology and doctrine (2014: 137) and Haslanger’s critique of “cognitivism” (2017: 7ff.).

functions of legitimating and defending imperial abuses (Firmin 2002: lvii). The chapter on European solidarity is written from this critical-historical perspective. It begins with an epigraph from Emilio Castelar – a leading historian of the Spanish empire who famously argued that Spain’s civilizing mission distinguished its conquest of the Americas from the displacement and exploitation strategies of its imperial rivals. By implanting modern liberal institutions, the colonizers had assimilated conquered and enslaved peoples into the Spanish nation, which Castelar understood as a simultaneously cultural and biological category of belonging. Hence the claim that Firmin used for an epigraph: “the idea of race completes the idea of a homeland” (Firmin 2002: 379; Castelar 1883: 49). The claim was grounded in Castelar’s view of the colonies as having no distinct history prior to the conquest – he represents them either as an empty Eden or as territories populated by barbarians whom Spain had civilized into history (cf. Schmidt-Nowara 2008). At the conclusion of the chapter, Firmin offers two suggestions for how those held captive by this ideological illusion can be brought “back to reality”. First, they must be “reminded” of their own history, of their “ignorant and vicious ancestors”, and that the centre of Enlightenment was once covered in darkness. Second, and most important, they must be shown that the widespread belief “that Blacks have no social history” is false – it must be proven that “the Black race” has “played a defining role in the destiny of the human species”; or, as he also puts it, it must be demonstrated that “Blacks ... have an eventful history” (Firmin 2002: 390-91).

In some sense, this is precisely what Firmin attempts to do. While he was explicit that he was “not writing history” in EHR, the chapter on European solidarity falls between those on “The Evolutionary Pace of the Black Race” and “The Role of the Black Race in the History of Civilization” (Firmin 2002: 371). Well-versed in Egyptology, he was one of the very first to argue that “the ancient

Egyptians... were black Africans”. While such arguments later served as a powerful referent for thinkers like Cheikh Anta Diop and Léopold Senghor, Firmin is neglected in studies of Afrocentrism. But he, too, saw the idea of a “Black Egypt” as central to the “argument against the idea of racial inequality”, for it proved that “from the time they entered stage of history, Blacks have shown evidence of admirable progress” (Firmin 2002: 237, 368; cf. Douglass 1854; Howe 1999; Joseph 2014). At times, he even engaged seriously with imperial historiography. Castelar was also a Republican politician who supported the inclusion of “Hispano-American” republics as “autonomous” units in a “close confederation” with Spain. Firmin cited him to argue for a kind of boomerang-effect from colony to metropole: as the effects of the Bolivarian revolutions “ricocheted on the century-old institutions of Europe”, so “European politics are propelled by” imperial rivalries in Asia or Africa, where every incident has “repercussions among the European nations” (Firmin 2002: 386, 398, citing Castelar 1883: 120-21). In this as in most respects, he celebrated the world-historical significance of the Haitian revolution: “Haiti’s independence has affected the economic system and moral order of all the European powers that owned colonies” and “had considerable bearing on the internal economy of all the American nations where slavery existed” (Firmin 2002: 398). He adduced biographical sketches of individual Haitians to demonstrate – to “the historian and the philosopher” alike – that “nature has endowed the Black race with the best of dispositions” (Firmin 2002: 365, 367). Above all, he joined the chorus of 19th-century anticolonial voices praising Toussaint L’Ouverture as an exemplary figure who “offers tangible proof of the superiority of the Black race” (Firmin 2002: 369; cf. Du Bois 1896: 70-93). For Firmin, both the structural ramifications of its revolution and the “extraordinary morality” of its participants meant that the argument for the equality of races “must start from Haiti” (Firmin 2002: lviii).

5 TOWARDS A THEORY OF ANTICOLONIAL SOLIDARITY

What happens to our ordinary ways of understanding solidarity now that we have recovered Firmin's anticolonial account? While that account is normatively attractive, I am not arguing that we simply recover it in order to apply it today – we should be sceptical of such naïve notions of historical recovery. But the history of political thought is philosophically valuable precisely because taking it seriously alerts us to a series of choices that have been made to view solidarity *this way* rather than *that* (Tully 2008: 16). In this sense, Firmin's account offers an important reminder: that, although it was subsequently displaced by models of solidarity that could be – and were – used to legitimate European colonialism, anticolonial solidarity has always been there, from the beginning, in solidarity's conceptual history. The choice remains for us either to continue to forget anticolonial models like Firmin's, or to use them to revise the history, theory, and practice of solidarity today.

And yet, Firmin's account certainly is normatively attractive. By way of conclusion, then, I want to highlight at least four features of that account that we can take as useful guides for theoretical reflection on solidarity in the future. Our theories of solidarity should be able to account for practices of solidarity such as those at the Canadian Embassy in Berlin. Following Firmin's lead, such a concept should be antiracist, and rooted in an anticolonialism that is (1) critical, (2) practically embedded, (3) transnational, and, perhaps, (4) global.

The contemporary discussion of (a)symmetry is important here because anticolonial solidarity emerges from and aims to address a structurally asymmetric relation between settlers and colonized. One reason why a rigid application of the symmetry condition can be problematic is that it

often postulates objective or even transcendent standards as the ultimate basis of symmetrical relations. For as the conceptual history of solidarity demonstrates, such standards have been routinely subject to ideological mystification or capture by a colonial logic, with the result that an insistence on symmetry actually reproduces or creates an asymmetry. To return to Bourgeois, he famously supported Japan's proposed racial equality bill at the Paris Peace Conference as enacting an "indisputable principle of justice". But he also refused to apply it universally, restricting it to "civilized" members of the League of Nations (cf. Shimazu 2002: 29, 119, citing *Conférence de paix de Paris 1919-1920*). Similarly, he sometimes went as far as to equate "human solidarity" with what he called "the solidarity of European interests" (Bourgeois 1913: 239). The perspective developed in this working paper allows us to see his doing so as a choice to reject precisely the sort of critique of "European solidarity" that Firmin had issued a decade earlier. For Firmin, the doctrine of racial inequality both allowed Europeans to usurp the idea of civilization and provided the core of expressions of solidarity similar to those in Bourgeois. And this potent ideological cocktail, he argued, was in fact "the greatest obstacle to the development of a sense of human solidarity" (Firmin 2002: 450). Firmin was thus critiquing the reduction of solidarity and civilization to a hegemonic perspective. He attempted to rescue both concepts from their connection to the false doctrine of racial inequality and, thereby, their ideological legitimation of European colonialism. This attempt suggests that we should take the symmetry condition to require a further condition – namely, critique of the political-ideological structures and everyday practices constituting the given asymmetry to which solidaristic action responds.

Firmin's critical anticolonial solidarity also helps to deepen the emphasis on practice or action in contemporary political theory. Even more than a philosophical defense of universalism, Firmin's

insistence that the principle of equality applied to all races was an explicitly political intervention designed to delegitimize practices of European colonialism. Perhaps this is why he and his contemporaries saw his account of solidarity as a crucial component of EHR. In August 1890, the Haitian diplomat Benito Sylvain founded a political journal in Paris called “La Fraternité”. In the first issue, he announced its aims in language similar to Firmin’s: by advancing “the interests of Haiti and the black race”, the journal would promote “the union of peoples... to march more effectively to the victory of progress and civilization”. This role, he continued, was “affirmed by the beautiful law of human solidarity” (Sylvain 1890: 1). Together, Firmin and Sylvain collaborated to republish excerpts from EHR across 42 issues of *La Fraternité* between April 1893 and November 1895. Given that much of the text was edited, it is significant that they chose to republish the chapter on European solidarity nearly unchanged. They also retained its structural framework of historical discussions of African slavery and Egyptology. Indeed, aside from the core anthropological arguments against polygenism, no other section of the text was republished more accurately or extensively. As what amounts to a sort of second edition, the *Fraternité* version of EHR clarifies what Firmin saw as its most important elements (Firmin 1893-1895). It also cautions us against restricting his historical context to his critique of the racist origins of modern anthropology. For it reminds us that he put his text to political use as a contribution to the theory and practice of anticolonial solidarity.¹²

12 In ongoing work, I read “*Fraternité*” (along with José Martí’s “*Patria*”) as a site for the creation of what Inés Valdez (2019: 161-177) calls an “anticolonial transnational counter-public”. Through a reconstruction of Du Bois’ writings and editorial practices in the 1920’s *The Crisis*, the official magazine of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Valdez identifies four dimensions of such counter-publics: (1) *Diagnostic*, which disseminated information about different forms of colonial oppression; (2) *Connective*, which reaches and creates bonds among differently located marginalized groups; (3) *Political Activation*: the public identifies particular structures of formal authority and

Because Firmin was also a radical political actor. Beyond his participation in Parisian anticolonial networks, he served as Haitian Commissaire in Caracas and Minister of Foreign Affairs before leading an armed movement to reform the Haitian government in 1902. Its failure led to his exile on Saint Thomas; and whereas EHR is a powerful example of historically informed critique, a clearer view of his constructive political thought emerges in the “Letters from Saint Thomas”. There, he offered at least a partial defense of “statism” when he described the rise of trade unionism and the push for nationalization in England as evidence of a “growing penetration of the spirit of solidarity between all the members of the community... under the central impulse of the state”. The state, on his view, represented the “universality of all citizens” rather than a “privileged minority”. As such, it could “attenuate” the individualism of industrial society to “harmonize” with “the spirit of benevolence, mutual aid and human solidarity, which must dominate all social relations” (Firmin 1910: 284-288). But his central concern was to explore the possibilities for a transnationalism rooted in anticolonial solidarity. For instance, he argued that the linguistic community established by Spanish and Portuguese colonialism formed an “intellectual bond” and awakened “a spirit of racial solidarity and especially of civilization” between the 65 million citizens of the newly independent Latin American nations. On this basis, he argued, a citizen of Venezuela, Mexico or Chile should “enjoy all the citizen prerogatives” of Cuba or Santo Domingo if, for any reason, they found themselves living “under the shadow of a new flag” (Firmin 1910: 76). More concretely, he also outlined his plans for a Pan-Caribbean Confederation. Grounded in and expressing “the spirit of

informal power, which it addresses with a claim of responsibility for particular grievances; (4) *Counter-sovereign function*: destabilizes the legitimacy of sovereignty by (a) exposing how sovereignty conceals transnational sources of domination and (b) revealing the disenfranchisement of marginalized groups from access to political power as formally codified (inter)nationally.

Antillean solidarity”, it would formalize regional ties institutionally to generate a “powerful sympathy between Antilleans, outside of, and above, all distinctions of race, origin, and nationality”. In a highly suggestive passage, he notes that he discussed these plans with Ramón Betances and José Martí, respectively the leaders of the revolutionary Puerto Rican and Cuban independence movements (Firmin 1910: 103, 107).¹³

Seeing Firmin’s critical theoretical work as inseparable from his anticolonial political practice, third, allows us to see him as a kind of “anticolonial worldmaker” (Bell 2013; Conrad 2016; Getachew 2019). The truly global dimensions of his account of solidarity are evident from his representing Haiti at the first Pan-African Conference, convened in London in 1900 by the Trinidadian lawyer Henry Sylvester Williams. The Conference closed with W.E.B. Du Bois’ famous declaration that “the problem of the twentieth-century is the problem of the color-line”. His argument is well-known: by denying the rights of “the black world” to participate in the “opportunities and privileges of modern civilization”, colonialism was fatal to both the colonized and the “high ideals of justice, freedom and culture” (Du Bois 1970: 135; cf. Rabaka 2020). While this moderate approach contrasts with the militancy of subsequent Pan-African Congresses, it is important to note that Sylvain was instrumental in turning the Conference agenda to consider the plight of “native races”

13 In ongoing work, I argue that Martí provides a model of anti-colonial solidarity that is distinctively asymmetric, without lapsing into either charity or deference. Martí emphasized that Cuban solidarity connected resident and émigré not through a commitment to “justice” as a “pedestal” transcending their concrete situation but, rather, through a struggle for the “unrestricted practice of true freedom” (2007). This orientation to freedom before justice grounds an asymmetrical understanding of solidarity because it includes a refusal to “imitate” or “copy” pre-existing models and an insistence on “creativity:” for Martí, solidarity was a practice of “self-criticism” in which the “mutual question... ‘what are we?’” had continually to be posed. See “Our America” and “With all, for the good of all” (Martí 2007: 120-29, 142-55). For the importance of an orientation to “freedom before justice” to anticolonial theory and practice, see Tully 2008, 37-8.

under colonial rule (Sherwood 2012). Indeed, he and Firmin had previously exchanged letters discussing “a Congress of scholars” to examine the question of racial inequality. Published in *La Fraternité* alongside the *EHR* excerpts, Firmin’s letter reiterates his belief in the power of debate to influence the course of both “politics and philosophy” in the coming century. Anticipating Du Bois’ identification of the global color-line, Firmin wrote that, with European powers “so preoccupied with transcontinental colonization”, it was evident that “the politics of the first half of the twentieth century at least, will be dominated by colonial questions”. In this context, unsettling the doctrine of racial inferiority would contribute to the progress of “sentiments of respect and solidarity”, thereby initiating a “more profound moral horizon for twentieth-century man” and even giving a different character to “international relations between the civilized” and “backward races” (Firmin in Martin 1975, 1998: 201-16). Collaborating with Du Bois and other Pan-Africanists, Firmin thus saw his defense of the ideals of civilization as requiring new transnational and global institutions rooted in and expressing anticolonial solidarity (cf. Valdez 2019: 117-53).

Firmin’s leading role in these activist networks might even allow us to see him as part of something like a wider tradition of the theory and practice of anticolonial solidarity. I cannot fully pursue that suggestion here, not least because of well-founded skepticism regarding the epistemic status of “traditions” of thought and their utility as a category of historical analysis: to reiterate, this working paper is not an attempt to recover an idea of anticolonial solidarity that has some “essential meaning” that remained “the same” over some extended period of time (Skinner 1969: 37). But it is nevertheless important to note that Firmin’s voice was far from a lonely one. To stretch the metaphor, he joined a chorus of anticolonial reformers and revolutionaries in singing what Du Bois called “sweet freedom’s song” (1985:

15). Like the Haitian Revolution that was his constant “source of consoling strength and unshakable hope”, that Firmin was “silenced” for so long reveals more about the limited critical capacities and political interests of his audience than the quality of the performance (Firmin 2002: lvii).¹⁴ Amplifying his voice merely begins the overdue task of revising the incomplete and partial conceptual history of solidarity regularly deployed by political theorists today.

This allows us, finally, to return to the Embassy action with which I began. Firmin’s account resonates in at least two ways with the approach to solidarity developed by Harsha Walia, a key activist-organizer of those social movements that responded to the Wet’suwet’en call. Embedded in concrete practices of anticolonial resistance, Firmin pursued decolonization by theorizing solidarity, as Walia suggests, “not in abstraction, but within our real... relationships” with the colonized. Moreover, his commitment to cultivating transnational networks and devising new global institutions harmonizes with Walia’s requirement to “reconceive” political movements and build new alliances rooted in anticolonialism, as opposed to “incorporating” anticolonial demands within

existing movements (Walia 2012). To be sure, dissonant notes remain. He says little about Indigenous populations or the specificity of settler colonialism, and the 19th-century ideas of civilization and progress to which he is committed are now tenuous at best. But we should celebrate his attempt to twin an understanding of solidarity as symmetrical with a commitment to critique, however sceptical we remain that even a critical appeal to civilization can ever avoid simply reproducing the kinds of political asymmetries that anticolonial solidarity aims to contest.

In sum, Firmin’s anticolonial model of solidarity accounts for transnational practices of solidarity such as those at the Embassy better than do those we have seen in contemporary political theory. A leading theorist of anticolonial resistance in Canada, James Tully, has argued that “Western political theories” serve one of two purposes – they either “legitimate” or “delegitimate” ongoing colonialism. One way to mitigate the risk of legitimation, he notes, is to ask, “what resources exist in political theory for thinking about the possibilities of a non-colonial relation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples” (Tully 2008: 266, 276). I want to suggest that Firmin’s critical, practically embedded, and transnational account of anticolonial solidarity is one such resource. Recovering it helps to critically reorient us to the received ways of thinking about solidarity, freeing us from their grip (Owen 2003). In doing so, it both clears critical theoretical space and responds to, while reciprocally supporting, ongoing practices of anticolonial solidarity today.

14 There are several possible explanations for the longstanding neglect of Firmin, many rooted in the colonial formation of disciplinary knowledge. For instance, while Haiti is far from “silent” in African Diaspora Studies, its framing as a reference point for Pan-African and Black Internationalism mutes the specificities of its post-revolutionary period and figures. Firmin is beginning to be acknowledged more frequently, as Caribbean intellectual historians are increasingly concerned to revise that discipline’s earlier Anglo-centrism (see Clitandre 2020). In the history of anthropology, Firmin can be anachronistically read as a ‘mere’ forerunner of the more influential Franz Boas: he has been called “a Boasian before Boas” because, 30 years before Boas’ *Mind of Primitive Man* (1911), he showed that Western theory and practice rests on diversity blindness masquerading as universality and thus legitimating colonization of human and more-than-human lifeforms. While they shared a certain “holistic” view of anthropology as a discipline, it has been argued that Firmin was both (1) more skeptical about the impact on intelligence of physical differences like cranial measurements, about which Boas equivocates (Fluehr-Lobban 2000); and (2) more “political” insofar as he linked the doctrine of racial inequality more clearly and explicitly to colonialism (Beckett 2017). On Boas, compare Tully 2018 and Simpson 2018.

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