

Contested Solidarities: Contentious Politics Between Resistance, Backlash and Change

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The last decade has witnessed a rise in social movements and solidarity protests within and across borders.

The conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza have ignited intense debate, along with a profound sense of injustice and an urgent call to end the violence. Individuals and communities have mobilized to support those affected, advocating for humanitarian aid, and diplomatic solutions, and amplifying the voices of victims. At the same time, protesters and collectives have organized solidarity events to support oppressed groups and communities while also contributing to overcome the situation by proposing alternatives to reach social justice and fairness, as well as to overcome repression, marginalization, and occupations. Furthermore, movements such as Black Lives Matter, transfeminist and LGBTQIA+ mobilizations, initiatives in solidarity with migrants, housing rights campaigns, collective protests for workers' rights and climate justice across the Global North and South, indigenous rights campaigns, and antifa mobilizations continue to create new ways and spaces across borders for challenging long-standing discriminatory norms, belief systems, and material inequalities.

Whether occurring through single or multiple episodes of protest, within and across borders, in physical spaces, and on digital platforms these collective responses oppose increasingly divisive social, political, and economic forces worldwide, and the dynamics of what is problematically considered legitimate and morally justifiable actions, even when involving violence, war, discrimination, harassment, or policy/law enforcement. Thus, solidarity becomes a powerful instrument of resistance - one that opens up new possibilities for collective action, stimulates repertoires for mobilization, supports the creation of new collective identities, and allows the construction of collective paths towards social change and social cohesion that ground deeply into shared and lived experiences.

And yet, contentious solidarities are constantly challenged. As a *politically charged* (Featherstone 2012) and *inherently contentious* (della Porta 2008, 2013) political practice, solidarity adopts an adversarial stance towards the state and oppressive power forces, and frequently involves

confrontational forms of action. As such, it faces sustained opposition from reactionary political institutions as much as regressive counter-movements that sparked and continue to feed a deep democratic backlash. Importantly, solidarity itself gets hijacked. Contemporary reactionary and far-right mobilizations also call upon solidarity and protection, albeit in a very different and exclusionary understanding. In contrast to progressive groups, they advocate restricted solidarity among those that deserve it - and call for exclusion of the “undeserving”.

Importantly, collective solidarities that strive for inclusive and transversal social change cannot be merely assumed or taken for granted. David Featherstone’s relational approach invites reflection on solidarities as *processual* – insofar as they are worked out through ongoing actions, dialogues, and are the result of a constant working process achieved from below through political action and, sometimes, conflict. Additionally, Donatella della Porta stresses that solidarity as a unifying force does arise from shared values and collective goals within social movements, even across vast distances. This captures how movements engage thoroughly and systematically in the labor of constructing and caring for solidarities that not only bind individuals and groups together in moral support but also catalyze action and advocacy across borders.

Against this background, the idea of contested solidarities encourages a nuanced understanding of social movements as evolving entities where unity is constantly balanced with diversity and where change is forged through often arduous but transformative relational practices.

The conference takes up this invitation and welcomes contributions, both theoretical and empirical, that explore two tightly interrelated meanings and political scopes of solidarity:

1. Solidarity as a Tool of Resistance: Examining how actions of solidarity within and across social movements seek to confront norms, rules, and events deemed unjust. These acts are central to collective resistance, organizing, and social change, but often require organizational capabilities that are not easy to establish. Also, understandings of solidarity can differ widely, and can be organized in very different ways. Researchers contributing to the understanding of this dynamic could therefore pursue very different research paths: from concrete actions of solidarity, to different forms of organizational repertoires to construct and achieve collective identities, belonging, empowerment, and expressions of solidarity, or the social consequences of actions of solidarity.
2. Delegitimization of Solidarity: Exploring counter mobilizations, counter protests and/or counter actions aimed at discrediting or suppressing solidarity efforts. These include verbal, physical, and symbolic attacks, as well as legal, social, and political backlash from opposing forces. Connected to this, researchers might not only shed light on repertoires, organizations, identities and programmes of concrete counter-mobilizations, but also scrutinize the societal preconditions for challenging or delegitimizing solidarity: under which conditions is solidarity rejected?

The Conference will have keynotes by, inter alia, Margit Mayer, and others TBC, as well as a panel session on academic journal publishing in the field of social movement research, hosted by *Social Movement Studies*, *Partecipazione e Conflitto* & *Mobilization*.

Key dates and info:

- Conference Dates: **16/17/18 June 2025**
- Location: **Central European University, Vienna**
- **Deadline for abstract submission: 20 February 2025**
- Length of abstracts: 250 max (+5 keywords)
- Selection outcomes: no later than 20 March 2025
- Registration: no later than 4 April 2025. Failing to register by this deadline will entail relocating the participation slot to other applicants in the reserve list. Information on registration procedure will be provided in due time.
- Abstract submission procedure: <https://forms.office.com/e/HVdymdCXPp>
- Contact: contestedsolidarities@ceu.edu

The conference is free of charge for paper presenters but asks for a small contribution of 70€ for co-authors and/or co-presenters. In order to facilitate the participation of early career scholars and researchers, the conference offers support for four PhD candidates whose abstracts will be selected (250€ individual support contributions). PhD candidates who would like to benefit from this support should indicate their request in the registration form. The abstract selection committee will select the four recipients and will reach out in due time with instructions on how to claim this contribution. On the first day of the conference, a mentoring session for young researchers and PhD candidates will be organized. Requests to participate in the mentoring session should be added to the registration form. The organizing committee will reach out in due time confirming the possibility of accommodating requests sent.