

Contributions from the Global South to intersectionality: Allowing rural difference to make a difference

This blog entry is based on our book chapter: Motta, R., & Teixeira, M. A. (2021). Allowing rural difference to make a difference: The Brazilian Marcha das Margaridas. In J. M. Conway, P. Dufour, & D. Masson (Eds.), *Cross-border solidarities in twenty-first century contexts: Feminist perspectives and activist practices* (pp. 79–99). Rowman and Littlefield.



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For some years now, we have been doing research about and with the Marcha das Margaridas, a coalition of social movements led by women's organizations within trade unions in Brazil. We have been motivated by questions related to coalition politics, the negotiation of a political subject and the agenda of the Margaridas, in particular how they articulate the quest for gender equality with other agendas of social change.

Situated within the social movement studies tradition as we had been, we have aimed at publishing papers

within journals of the area. In this process, we saw a need for contributing to the conceptualization of solidarity, since we believe it is undertheorized in social movement studies. The reason for that are either very generic references to solidarity as a strategy of establishing connections to other struggles or, when there are attempts to define solidarity, they aim at analytical differentiation for quantitative purposes, that then yield very descriptive results or fragile definitions.



We encountered a thought-provoking and enriching exchange when we joined a book project by a group of scholars working on cases of feminist solidarity-building with the goal of contributing to theoretical and conceptual work on solidarity (Conway et al., 2021). We all departed from the acknowledgement that the under-theorization of the concept of solidarity hides Euro-modernist political-normative projects and

assumptions, namely, a universalist account of the political subject of coalition politics that erases issues of difference, inequalities, alterity. Such inability or unwillingness reveals colonial legacies in the social sciences, in particular, in what refers to relations of domination and exclusion along racial lines.[\[1\]](#)

By contrast, within critical social theory and feminist scholarship, a normative theorization and analysis of solidarity prevails. Black feminists in the USA have coined the term intersectionality in order to highlight difference and inequalities within what had been perceived as a unified feminist movement. Building on that, postcolonial feminisms have

challenged European-modernist universalist assumptions behind transnational categories of feminist solidarities, such as global sisterhood, while also criticizing attempts to reduce the colonial difference into simplified categories such as “the third world women”. Concerned with the political problem of inequalities among women in different contexts, postcolonial feminism brings to the fore the broader normative and political question of solidarity-building in emancipatory struggles. However, a conceptualization of solidarity as a potential, as a political project that must be constructed by linking struggles does not describe how, or explain why and when such potentiality actually unfolds into solidarity.

In this sense, Masson and Paulos (2021) and Conway (2017, 2018) have warned that the normative analytics of transnational feminism can also limit the analysis of practices of solidarity-building taking place in struggles not informed by the same histories and legacies; thus the need for a middle-ground conceptualization and analysis of solidarity. Masson and Paulos differentiate between solidarity as (the result of) a political construction and solidarity-building as the process that generates it. Drawing on feminist geography, the authors also propose that building solidarity can involve bridging social differences and connecting places, organizations and struggles.

In our chapter to the book, we find their conceptualization very useful to analyse the processes taking place at the Marcha. However, we argue that there is not just a matter of the correct “fit” between normative theory and the empirical reality of struggles, which is an always-evolving praxis; and thus finding a middle-ground would solve the problem. In addition to that, we see the need to incorporate categories of analysis emerging from the Global South. We emphasized that the normativity within feminist theories approaches to solidarity must also be considered within the geopolitics of knowledge and the colonality of knowledge (Giraldo, 2016; Mendoza, 2015). In the English-language dominated field of feminist

theories, a specific understanding of intersectional analysis is expected from anyone wanting to publish in English about women's movements and feminism. We argue for the need to theorize and analyze the specific categories of difference that emerge endogenously (as any other) from processes of solidarity-building in actual struggles (as any other), rather than—or in addition to—those established in the canonic intersectionality analysis. As a matter of fact, the canon has also emerged from concrete struggles of black feminists in the US context and postcolonial feminisms in contexts from the former British colonial empire.

In Latin American postcolonial

societies, we claim that another difference gains salience in the struggles for rights and against discrimination: the rural/urban difference. The persistent condition of the coloniality of power in rural settings cannot be overstated in Latin America, where land concentration indexes surpass already high levels of social inequality, and are accompanied by violent conflicts over land and territory, as well as the disposability of racialized, ethnicized bodies. Decolonial feminisms have emerged in Latin American rural contexts that reject mainstream feminisms and therefore challenge feminist scholarship in accounting for diversity within feminisms.



We make our argument based on our research with the Marcha das Margaridas, as said above. We consider the Marcha as one of the most impressive instances of women's organizing and praxis of feminist solidarity in rural contexts in twenty-first-century Latin America. First, it is impressive due to its size and mobilizing capacity, bringing between twenty thousand to one hundred thousand women from all of

the twenty-seven Brazilian provinces—and very remote areas—to the national capital, Brasília. Second, and, related to that, the Marcha's diversity is noticeable, as women situated in various specific rural contexts (with varying land property relations, types of food production, histories of struggles and specific conflict lines, dynamics of racialization, relations to the natural resources) come together. Women situated in different urban contexts also join the mobilization. Third, although rural working women make up the majority of the grassroots base, due to the organizational and political leadership of the rural trade union movement, the Marcha emerged through a politics of alliances with women's movements,

feminist movements, urban trade unions, agrarian movements, and NGOs (Motta & Teixeira, 2022). Finally, the Marcha is an interesting case to investigate processes of solidarity-building, thanks to its durability. With its first edition taking place in the year 2000, they have managed to establish a timetable of periodic mass actions, with six editions so far (2000, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, and 2019). We draw on different types of data: documental analysis of archival material produced by the Marcha, participatory observation of the march in 2015 and 2019, and semi-structured interviews with activists. The Marcha politically build solidarity bridging place-based struggles and social differences, always informed

by the category of rurality. Considering place-based struggles, we saw in their documents and in the organization of the street march, that a very important aspect is the recognition of the specific sites where rural working women live, work, and struggle. The Marcha makes efforts of taking the diversity of rural contexts and place-based struggles, related to specific geographies and biomes, into account. Most often the socio-spatial context is related to the natural environment, for example regarding access to land and to water. Different environments, regions, and biomes create specific working possibilities and restraints, entail specific types of resources for production, and thus concrete political demands. By

naming these and displaying the diversity of rurality in their narrative and in their political agenda and street performance, the Marcha is able to bring together women from all over the country. Because of the adaptation to changing needs and struggles based on different places, the Marcha can be seen as a process of solidarity-building instead of a static alliance.

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Regarding the second type of solidarity building, namely, the bridging of social differences, we have analysed how rurality is a key category of articulating a political subject. In line with Aguiar (2015), we have traced the always evolving political meanings of the collective “we” formed by the Marcha das Margaridas. The self-identification in the Marcha has changed over time to a more inclusive term. Starting with the political subject rural working women, an intersection of class,

gender and rurality, the negotiations over the coalitional identity Margaridas (Motta, 2021) have resulted in the diversification of rurality and the political subject has progressively changed to include “women from the field, the forest, and the waters.” More than different places, the rural difference relates to a worker identity and specific human-environmental relations involved. A politics of location, which is not place-based but pivots on socio-material locations, takes into account the diversity of rural situations in which women work and live and informs a feminist politics of difference in the Marcha subject’s formation. This process allows diversity within the category of rurality, as it opens

to more identities of working women in non-urban contexts. It means that if there are commonalities shaped by gender, class and rurality, which take women to join in a coalition, their political work of solidarity-building recognizes differences within rural working women, so that all different segments see themselves represented in the political subject. Since 2015 racial, ethnic and generational categories became more visible in the demands of the movement, but there is still a lot of (political) work to be done in articulating Indigeneity and an anti-racist agenda and political subject. The Marcha actively constructs their political subject and is still working on building solidarity. We see this as a

precondition for the movement's achievements and their successful ways of forging alliances.

In short, we have argued for the importance of looking closely at which categories of difference matter in the actual struggles of solidarity-building. We identified rurality as a category of difference that emerges within the struggles from the Marcha das Margaridas in Brazil. We claim that rurality is a category of colonial difference, one which decenters the whiteness and urban predicaments of European-modernist conceptions of solidarity. For the Latin American context, we believe that rurality can be fruitfully added to the salient categories of difference already identified by

Black Feminists in the US, namely race, class and citizenship. We hoped to have shown how socio-spatial differences that are at play in the coloniality of power in Latin America and the Global South, add to the complexity of intersectionality. We believe that the urban-rural difference and the category of rurality could inform other struggles in areas of commodities extraction, too. And we wanted to encourage researchers to find other categories of difference emerging in other cases of solidarity-building. We therefore proposed open-ended, feminist theorizing of solidarity.

[1] One does not need to do research in the former colonial world, or in the Global South in order to deal with issues of alterity and racial exclusion, as these dynamics within social movements are also present within the Global North.

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