INTRODUCTION

Thinking solidarity politically

If you had passed through the manufacturing districts of Lancashire and Cheshire, in North West England, in the early 1860s you might have heard or read an appeal issued by Frederick Douglass. The American fugitive slave and abolitionist Douglass was a well-known figure in England. He had toured Britain and Ireland extensively in the 1840s during his campaigns for slave emancipation. In ‘The Slave’s Appeal to Great Britain’ Douglass sought to mobilise support for the cause of the North in the American Civil War. He declared that ‘the North is fighting on the side of liberty and civilisation, and the South on the side of slavery and barbarism’ (Douglass, 1862: 304).

Douglass appealed directly to workers in the cotton factories of the North West. This was significant. The Civil War in America had led to a ‘cotton famine’ in Lancashire with devastating consequences. This was a direct product of the cotton blockade of the Southern states by forces loyal to the Union. Between November 1861 and November 1862 full-time employment in the Lancashire cotton industry fell by over 300,000.

Douglass’s appeal asserted that ‘humanity could not permit the needs of the British mills to determine the future of millions in slavery’. ‘Must the world stand still’, he asked, ‘humanity make no progress and slavery remain forever, lest your cotton mills should stop and your poor cry for bread?’ (Douglass, 1862). Further, Douglass contended that the conflict in the United States had a key lesson for Britain: ‘you should base your industry and prosperity on the natural foundations of justice and liberty’ (Douglass, 1862).

Douglass’s appeal had effects. It was circulated and reprinted. This drew on Douglass’s extensive contacts among abolitionist and working-class organizers. Alexander Innes wrote to Douglass assuring him that his ‘Appeal’ was being read in working-class circles and was having a ‘profound effect’ in Lancashire, as well as in other parts of the British Isles (Foner, 1981: 104 n23). This ‘profound effect’ was significant working-class support for the US North. This helped to block the plans of then British prime minister Lord Palmerston to intervene militarily in the Civil War on behalf of the South (Foster, 2000).

Despite the hardships associated with the ‘cotton famine’ there was strong backing among northern working-class movements for the Union. A mass meeting held in Manchester on 31 December 1862 passed a resolution stating:
That this meeting, recognising the common brotherhood of mankind and the sacred and inalienable right of every human being to personal freedom and equal protection, records its detestation of negro slavery in America, and of the attempts of the rebellious Southern slaveholders to organise on the great American continent a nation having slavery as its basis. (cited by Foner, 1981: 40)

The meeting at the Free Trade Hall was co-organized by two working men from Manchester: the one-time Chartist agitator Edward Hooson and J.E. Edwards. Edwards was moved to act by the support given by the Manchester Guardian to the Confederates. Working-class movements in London mobilized similar support for the North.

Other meetings in Lancashire demonstrated their solidarity. A meeting of the ‘distressed operatives of Blackburn’ declared that ‘they earnestly pray that the civil war now, unhappily, raging amongst you — and which your memorialists deeply lament — may come to a speedy termination in favour of freedom, regardless of race or colour’ (Distressed Operatives, 1863: n.pag.). These solidarities were reciprocated. The Union sent shiploads of aid to the distressed workers of Lancashire. The George Griswold reached Liverpool in February 1863, with provisions valued at £27,000 and cash donations of £1,333. Workers at the docks ‘refused payment for their services’ and ‘the railways offered free transport’ (Foner, 1981: 50–51).

These actions impressed Karl Marx, who as a political exile in London took a keen interest in the Civil War. Marx celebrated the ‘pressure from without’ that the English working class exerted on the pro-South policy of Palmerston (Marx and Engels n.d., 140–41). This pressure was constructed by working-class movements despite their exclusion from political representation. Marx asserted the significance of this political stance given the ‘misery that the stoppage of the factories and the shortening of the labor time, motivated by the blockade of the slave states, has produced among the workers in the northern manufacturing districts’. He hailed the ‘obstinacy with which the working class keeps silent, or breaks its silence only to raise its voice against intervention and for the United States’.

These solidarities contributed to the founding of the International Working Men’s Association (IMWA) in 1864, one of the first attempts to organize a politicized, working-class internationalism. Marx was one of the key instigators of the International. Marx’s ‘inaugural address’ makes clear the importance of the inspiration of the solidarities forged during the cotton famine for this political formation. ‘It was not the wisdom of the ruling classes’, he contended, but ‘the heroic resistance to their criminal folly by the working classes of England, that saved the west of Europe from plunging headlong into an infamous crusade for the propagation of slavery on the other side of the Atlantic’ (Marx, 1974: 81). Such solidarities opened up possibilities for the labour movement in the United States. In Capital he contended that ‘every independent workers’ movement’ in the United States ‘was paralysed as long as slavery disfigured part of the republic. Labour in a white skin cannot emancipate itself where it is branded in a black skin’ (Marx, 1973: 414).

The International’s address to Abraham Lincoln, on his reelection in 1864, likewise drew attention to these working-class solidarities. The address averred that if ‘resistance to the Slave Power was the reserved watchword of your first election, the triumphant war-cry of your re-election is ‘Death to Slavery’. It noted of the ‘men of labour’ that ‘they bore patiently the hardships imposed upon them by the cotton crisis, opposed enthusiastically the pro-slavery intervention — importunities of their betters — and, from most parts of Europe, contributed their quota of blood to the good cause’ (First International, 1864: 52). A proposal for a Member of Parliament to be part of the deputation that presented the address ‘was
strongly opposed by many members who said working men should rely on themselves and not seek for extraneous aid.4

Marx’s engagements with these solidarities are significant. They demonstrate that the emergence of politicized working-class internationalism was driven not only by key theorists or political figures. It was animated by connections forged through political struggle. These connections and solidarities were, as Marx emphasizes, not produced by dispassionate elites; they were forged through the actions of dispossessed workers who had much to gain in the short term by breaking the cotton blockade. They were constructed, then, by what Marx termed ‘pressure from without’.

This is a book about the creation of solidarities from below. It argues that they are a powerful force for reshaping the world in more equal terms. They have been central to attempts to make the world anew. The makings of such solidarities have, however, frequently been marginalized and actively silenced. This book sets out to assert their importance. It seeks to tell stories about forms of agency and political activity constructed through mobilizing practices of solidarity. These stories seek to animate accounts of the political left in both the past and the present.

Thinking solidarity

Solidarity is a central practice of the political left. It is indispensable to the activity of radical social and political movements. It has, however, rarely been the subject of sustained theorization, reflection or investigation. Here I define solidarity as a relation forged through political struggle which seeks to challenge forms of oppression. To develop a sustained engagement with the formation, force and importance of solidarity involves engaging with a set of key theoretical challenges. Some of these challenges can be gleaned through an engagement with the solidarities forged with the US ‘North’ in the context of the Cotton Famine.

First, these actions locate solidarity as a transformative relation. Solidarity has often been understood as being about likeness. This approach obscures the importance of solidarities in constructing relations between places, activists, diverse social groups. This can involve the cementation of existing identities and power relations. It can, however, as frequently be about the active creation of new ways of relating. It is through being attentive to such relations that the dynamism and inventiveness of solidarities can emerge.

Second, there is the importance of solidarity as a practice that can be forged ‘from below’ or through ‘pressure from without’. Such solidarities can be powerfully shaped by working-class groups and movements. This asserts the importance of marginal groups in shaping practices of solidarity. It is a direct challenge to assumptions that subaltern groups, those subject to diverse forms of oppression, lack the capacity or interest to construct solidarities. As the case of Lancashire cotton workers suggests, the forging of solidarities under such oppressive conditions was still achieved. This created political agency which Marx contended stopped the British government intervening in support of the South.

Third, there is the refusal of political activity to stay neatly contained within the nation-state. The solidarities forged through the cotton boycott were shaped by diverse ongoing connections. They were enabled by the tours of Douglass and connections made with labour movement and religious abolitionists. They were shaped through diverse exchanges, contacts and linkages. These also cut across and challenged the powerful racial divisions that were central to the US Civil War, but that also shaped British society and left movements in pernicious ways.
Fourth, solidarities are constructed through uneven power relations and geographies. The solidarities with the North were forged through negotiating racialized, gendered and classed spaces of encounter. The terms on which solidarities with American slaves were produced were often characterized by important asymmetries of power. Thus George Howell, a former Chartist, bricklayer and secretary of the London Trades Council during the years 1861 and 1862, denounced the ‘vociferous champions of the South’, arguing that they were “enemies of liberty and progress” in the past and would be so in the future (Foner, 1981: 33).

Foner notes, however, that this did not mean that Howell believed that ‘blacks were equal to whites in every area of life’. Howell was convinced, however, that with freedom blacks would overcome these disadvantages: ‘give him freedom, surround him with healthier circumstances and you will develop in the slave a manlier life’ (Foner, 1981: 103 n16). This emphasizes the racialized and gendered terms on which solidarities were configured. The IMWA also fashioned a distinctively male-centred construction of internationalism. These were also, however, practices through which prejudice could be challenged, reworked and brought into contestation. They generated exchanges and connections which cut across and refused powerful divides.

Finally, there is the sense of solidarities as inventive. They produce new ways of configuring political relations and spaces. This is central to Marx’s account in the inaugural address. This shaped ways of thinking differently about working-class political activity. It opened up possibilities for thinking about how working-class and subaltern politics can shape international terrains. This was grounded through specific connections, relations and labour politics. Central here was the construction of political spaces and connections across the Atlantic. These solidarities depended on imaginative ways of understanding place-based politics in Lancashire, such place-based politics being conceptualized in relational terms. It was understood that to break the cotton blockade would have implications for those in the Southern states of the United States who faced the oppressive conditions of slavery. Thus Marx believed that the willingness of Manchester workers to rally in support of the North, even though the ‘cotton famine’ menaced their own livelihood, showed the moral superiority of a rising class (Blackburn, 2011a: 40).

This ‘pressure from without’ can reshape the terrain of what is politically possible and what counts or is recognized as political. This contestation produces new ways of generating political community and different ways of shaping relations between places. It is necessary to think seriously about the relations between contestation and solidarity. As the cotton famine example suggests, solidarities can be forged through political antagonisms. The mobilizing of transnational solidarities through working-class anti-slavery politics was inventive. The terms on which these antagonisms were shaped allowed new forms of internationalist political community to emerge.

Solidarities, then, are not just part of the binding together of pre-existing communities. They can be much more active in shaping political contestation than this suggests. In this sense solidarities can be part of the process of politicization. The forging of links in opposition to common enemies such as slaveholders (and Tory prime ministers) can open up new political terrains and possibilities. This allows new conceptions of political subjects and actors to emerge. At stake in the struggles around the cotton famine were different groups such as slaves and working-class men who were denied political rights and representation in different ways, though this is not to suggest the forms of oppression they faced were equivalent.
Engaging with this inventive character of solidarity is central to thinking solidarities politically. By this term I mean thinking solidarity as a political relation that shapes different ways of challenging oppression and inequalities. Political articulations of solidarity are shaped through diverse practices. This book explores the multifarious ways in which such practices are shaped and constituted. The book does engage with the conduct of left political parties and organized internationalist movements. It adopts an expansive sense of the forms of political activity that have shaped left internationalisms.

The book is animated by a concern with the ‘subterranean solidarities’ forged through political activity (Buck Morss, 2009: 133). I do not envision such solidarities as the product of a domain that is autonomous from official politics. I have sought to trace and engage with the intersections and relations that make up the socially mixed make up of different left movements. Nonetheless it seeks to foreground forms of solidarity and internationalism that have been frequently hidden, silenced and obscured.

**Constructing internationalism from below**

The book uses this focus on diverse forms of solidarity to assert the important ways internationalism has been created from below. I use the term ‘internationalism’ because of its direct association with attempts by left political movements to reshape the world on more equitable terms. This differs from terms such as ‘transnationalism’ which have been less directly associated with explicit political projects. Internationalism has often been written about and theorized through top-down accounts which focus on hierarchical forms of left political organization. These accounts have often excluded the role of subaltern political activity in shaping practices of internationalism.

In the case of the Cotton Famine the oppressive conditions of the cotton operatives did not prevent them understanding the implications of the cotton blockade being broken. This speaks to the importance of subaltern actors in shaping internationalist political cultures. Through interventions in the connections between Lancashire and the United States the operatives constructed agency from below. The pressure they exerted on the material and social connections that linked Lancashire to the USA had significant impacts on the ways in which these relations were constructed. Tracing and asserting the importance of such forms of subaltern agency in shaping political relations between places is a primary concern of this book.

Subaltern political activity has frequently been seen as trapped in place, or as lacking cosmopolitan outlooks. This is to marginalize the diverse and productive ways through which marginal actors have engaged with connection and mobility, albeit often on profoundly unequal terms. This allows subalternity, the diverse forms which marginality can take, to be refigured as being about the ‘active determination of society and space’ (Chari, 2012; see also Gilmore, 2008a). It is the generative world-making possibilities of subaltern political activity that this book seeks to assert and engage with.

This project draws on long-standing attempts to create histories from below. The recovery of such histories has been an important contribution of left intellectuals and movements for some time. This has shaped powerful re-tellings of the past from movements ranging from the Communist
Party Historians’ Group in Britain to the Subaltern Studies Collective in India. Drawing attention to such marginalized histories can change the terms on which people understand themselves and their histories. They can also provide important ‘usable pasts’ for engagements with political activity in the present (see Featherstone, 2008; Phillips, 2007). Experiences of solidarity, as Chitra Joshi argues, can ‘become sedimented as part of working class memory, recalled and celebrated in subsequent periods of struggle’ (Joshi, 2003: 11).

Hidden geographies are a less commonplace endeavour. I use this term to assert the role of subaltern geographies of connection in constructing internationalisms. This opens up different ways of thinking about the histories and geographies of left politics, and challenges existing ways of narrating the political left. This is usefully illustrated by accounts of the iconic political movements of 1968 by Kristin Ross and Ruth Wilson Gilmore. This was a year when ‘revolutionaries around the world made as much trouble as possible in as many places as possible’ (Gilmore, 2008b: 24; Katsiafas, 1987). Ross contests the recuperation of the 1968 movements in France as nothing more than heralding the birth of a radically individualized society, by insisting on the importance of anti-colonial internationalisms to these events (Ross, 2002).

Ross argues that throughout the 1960s in France, ‘themes of anticapitalism and internationalism were spontaneously combined; the discourses of anti-capitalism and anti-imperialism were woven together in an intricate mesh’ (2002: 11). This positions these movements not in solely national terms. Rather, it locates them as part of ‘overlapping communities of resistance’ which shaped ‘opposition to the U.S. war in Vietnam’ and ‘linked up with anti-colonialism and anti-apartheid forces on a world scale’ (Gilmore, 2008b: 24). These accounts treat the left as a product of different connections and relations. They challenge narratives which contain left politics within fixed containers of the nation-state. This allows something more politically generative to emerge than a depoliticizing story about their role in developing an aggressively individualized society.

This has consequences. Asserting the diverse trajectories and connections shaped by left political solidarities opens up political possibilities. This challenges caricatured and stereotyped accounts of the left as sectional and inward-looking, which, necessarily, foreclose political possibilities in the present and future. This book seeks to tell multiple and contested stories and trace trajectories which have shaped the political left. This opens up a different sense of who and what counts as part of left politics. I adopt the following approach to understanding the histories and geographies of left social and political movements.

First, I challenge nation-centred histories of the left. This draws attention to the importance of political activists, connections, solidarities that do not fit neatly within dominant accounts of the left. Accounts of internationalism still remain remarkably nation-centred (see Chapter 2). They frequently position agency primarily in the leaderships of particular national left movements or parties. A key casualty of such nation-centred accounts of internationalism has been the contributions of anti-colonial intellectuals, activists and movements to European left movements.

Important accounts of the history of the left, such as Geoff Eley’s Forging Democracy, continue to give a rather marginal role to the impact of anti-colonial activists on left movements in Europe (Eley, 2002). Ways of organizing the intellectual history of left political traditions, such as Perry Anderson’s conception of Western Marxism, similarly obscure such political connections (Anderson, 1976). To acknowledge the contributions of anti-colonial movements to European left politics is not just to add an excluded dimension that develops a fuller or more complete history. Rather, it is to challenge the very terms on which left politics is understood and articulated.
Second, I position left political movements as the products of diverse trajectories and connections. This allows a focus on diverse forms of labour and agency in shaping internationalist political activity and assembling connections. This challenges ways of writing the histories and geographies of left social and political movements which focus primarily on leaderships and left elites (Wolford, 2010). Important alternative histories, such as Vijay Prashad’s account of the history of the political idea of the Third World, have focused on such elites (Prashad, 2007). This account therefore seeks to de-centre the role of iconic left leaders and figures in shaping internationalist cultures. This is not to suggest that major figures were not important or did not shape left political cultures in significant ways. It is to insist, however, that foregrounding left elites limits an engagement with the diverse subaltern forms of agency that have shaped internationalist connections.

Finally, this attention to the diverse forms of labour involved in shaping, assembling and maintaining transnational solidarities seeks to foreground the generative conduct of left political activity. Engagements with political strategy or organizing have often focused primarily on the ways in which these have been theorized. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s influential Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, for example, is characterized by a striking absence of attention to the conduct of political struggles and activity (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). The account of left political activity developed here, by contrast, seeks to be alive to the generative character of political struggle.

Central to the book is an attempt to construct a genealogy of left politics that takes both the geographies and the conduct of political activity and struggle seriously. It by no means attempts to construct a comprehensive history of internationalism from below. Rather, it is focuses on particular events and movements. These have been chosen to illustrate the multifarious and productive character of solidarity. It explores forms of political activity such as anti-colonial networks which created situated connections across deeply uneven geographies. The case studies develop a focus on different forms of internationalist organizing. While they focus on subaltern articulations of internationalism, the movements they describe are often socially mixed and heterogeneous.

There are, of course, many different uses of solidarity by elite and middling as well as subaltern and working-class movements. This book focuses on solidarities forged through direct opposition to inequality and oppression. This project is informed by a political commitment. The book does not seek to provide a solely positive, rosy gloss on solidarity. It also confronts and engages with some of the ‘dark sides’ of solidarity and the way they have been used to entrench as well as challenge privilege by left movements. It is nonetheless written out of an avowedly partisan position that solidarities can be a powerful force for reshaping worlds in more socially equitable and just ways.