

Book review of ‘*The Strains of Commitment. The Political Sources of Solidarity in Diverse Societies*’, edited by Keith Banting and Will Kymlicka (Oxford University Press, 2017)

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Author version of the book review:

Niessen, C. (2019). The Strains of Commitment. The Political Sources of Solidarity in Diverse Societies [book review]. *Regional & Federal Studies*. doi:10.1080/13597566.2019.1567501.

Available online: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13597566.2019.1567501>.**

In ‘*The Strains of Commitment. The Political Sources of Solidarity in Diverse Societies*’, the editors Keith Banting and Will Kymlicka investigate how solidarity can be sustained despite being increasingly challenged by societal diversity, in order to achieve a just society.¹ Through a rigorous revisit of the nature, importance and political sources of solidarity, they provide a convincing pledge in favor of narratives, actors and policies that develop an inclusive territorial identity. By combining theoretical contributions around an implicit debate between the editors, Levy and Van Parijs (*cf.* Figure 1) and empirical studies that test or extend their considerations, the book speaks to both political theorists and comparativists.

The introduction by Banting and Kymlicka is the anchor chapter and contains their key argument relying on three parts. First, they explain that solidarity consists in attitudes that lead the members of society to mutually accept, cooperate and support each other. Their critical proposition is that solidarity is necessary for just institutions to be sustained. While the latter might have come into existence following the political struggle of societal groups, they argue that it needs more than (fragile) balances of interests to sustain them. Secondly, they explain that what is eroding today is people’s willingness to support each other (through redistribution), for which societal diversity is not solely but substantively responsible because it challenges people’s view of belonging to the same ethical community. Thirdly, they show that people’s view of belonging to the same community is highly influenced by political narratives, actors and policies. Their final argument is that the latter need to reflect and promote an inclusive territorial identity that is sufficiently ‘thick’ to create a feeling of common belonging and sufficiently ‘thin’ to remain open to outsiders.

The chapters in the first part of the book are mainly concerned with revisiting, extending or challenging Banting and Kymlicka’s argument from a theoretical point of view. While David Miller digs further into the meaning of solidarity, Rainer Bauböck develops the editors’ argument for communities on multiple political levels. Jacob Levy, in an originally dissident contribution, argues that ‘bounded’ solidarity is dangerous because – despite being inclusive – it requires creating an imagined community “as if outsiders to [it] are outsiders to the moral

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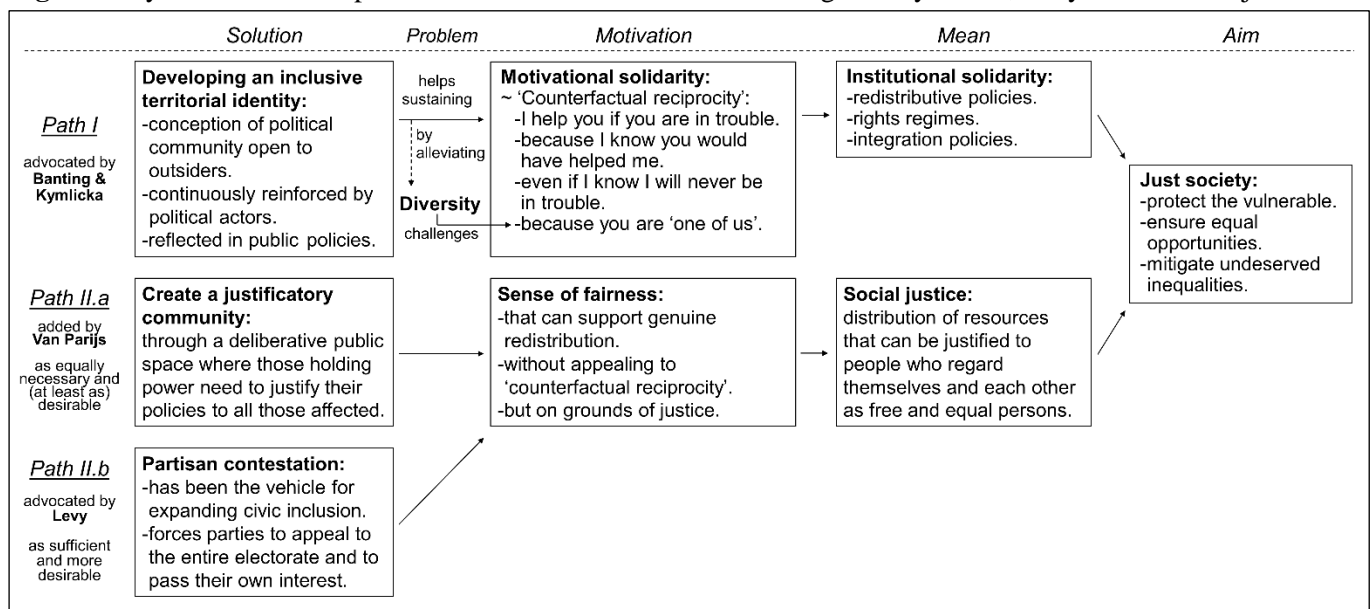
¹ They define a just society as one that protects the vulnerable, ensures equal opportunities and mitigates undeserved inequalities.

category of those owed just treatment” (111). Moreover, he explains that bounded solidarity is unnecessary because partisan contestation is more likely to lead to a sense of fairness that allows enacting just politics.

The chapters in the second and third part of the book investigate several of the preceding theoretical considerations empirically. More specifically, part two focuses on how different conceptions of nationhood translate into different degrees of support for solidarity. Part three examines the place of solidarity in the political debate.

In his concluding reflections, Philippe Van Parijs makes the useful distinction between motivational and institutional solidarity and argues that, beside popularizing an inclusive territorial identity, another path for achieving a just society consists in popularizing a sense of fairness that does not rely on solidarity but on justice only. For achieving the latter, he puts his trust in a deliberative public space where all those holding power need to justify their policies to all those affected.

Figure 1. Synthesis of the implicit theoretical debate between Banting and Kymlicka, Levy and Van Parijs.



Altogether, the book provides an impressively lucid account of one of the most pressing contemporary societal issues. Thereby, its main originality lies not only in building a bridge between theories of multiculturalism and justice, but also in the exemplary articulation of political theory and empirical social science when investigating both. Moreover, the book succeeds the twofold challenge of each edited volume: bringing together chapters that are internally coherent enough to read as individual pieces and externally coherent enough to contribute to a common story.

Beside this appraisal, two shortcomings should be noted. On the one hand, while Banting and Kymlicka's propositions seem sound, one would want to know more about how precisely diversity affects people's view of belonging to the same ethical community and how identity contributes to alleviating this. Hall contends, for example, that it is not inclusive territorial identities but solidaristic values contained in these identities that contribute to people's willingness to pursue just politics. On the other hand, one would have liked Banting and Kymlicka to address more directly the challenges by Levy and Van Parijs, who portray an

alternative path for achieving a just society (*cf.* Figure 1). As explained above, while Levy contends that bounded solidarity is neither desirable nor necessary for establishing a just society, Van Parijs argues it is insufficient.

Despite these criticisms, the book stands out in the field. It will find most interest among political scientists and philosophers interested in how identities and institutions influence social cohesion in diverse societies, and in what this means for theories of federalism, multiculturalism, justice and even, as far as it overlaps with the former, of deliberative democracy. Fields whose closer cooperation this book has shown to be both promising and urgent.