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## Unity in Shared Vulnerability

### Contribution to GTI Forum [Can Human Solidarity Globalize?](#)

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We can build a new future by looking out over a new horizon lamenting—impatiently—all that still must be done. Or we can acknowledge all that has been achieved that once seemed impossible. For within our necessarily imperfect reality, we can see the building of a dream in progress. If the pandemic has exposed one thing, it is that the social imperative that drives the global society is “the human trait that the capacity and inclination to connect is greater than to disconnect. The desire to cross borders is greater than to build walls, and the desire to explore new lands is greater than to stay at home.”<sup>1</sup> Yes, the history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of expanding solidarity. Yet in the *longue durée* of expanding solidarities, the step towards global solidarity faces a particular transformation.

### Imagining Patriotism for Humanity

These are the times for radical imaginations, and we are challenged to imagine a “patriotism for humanity.” I am reminded of an art installation of the Irish artist John Byrne, in which he asks people on O’Connell Bridge in Dublin simply one question: Would you die for Ireland? No context given. “Yes, I would die for me country!”, some say. “No, no interest whatsoever!”, another one exclaims. “Yes, if the money was right,” one guy replies, and one woman with flaming red hair simply sighs, “I am dying for my country, bit by bit. Every day.” Ireland is, of course, a country with contested borders. But would you die for Italy? For France? For Italy? For Germany? Would you die for the United States of America? Would you die for our planet? Would you make the ultimate sacrifice for Humanity? The answer might probably not be “yes” or “no” or “depends on the money,” but most likely be “why?”

How different would the answers be if Mars attacks! We can immediately imagine humanity coming together as one. We, Earthlings, will create an Army of Earthlings, defending our beloved blue and green planet. Flags will be designed, blue and green waving from every building of every capital of countries now provinces of Earth-land. We will sing the Earthling Anthems—“The Planet of the Free and Home of the Brave”—and all subversive elements will be called traitors. We will say, “We are one: one earth, one people.” The problem is not the possibility of global solidarity, because we know it is slumbering just to be awakened as this imagination demonstrates. Nor is it the need for global solidarity, for every house divided against itself will not stand and will be brought to desolation—as we are seeing around us every day.

The main problem that we are currently facing is the absence of an imminent alien invasion, an external enemy. How can we become “we” when there is no “them”? If we have nothing but ourselves, a kingdom divided? This means that we must imagine new ways, new forms that shape social cohesion.

## Shared Global Vulnerability

I argue that the path towards global solidarity is built upon the notion of shared vulnerability. No longer is our strength what defines us as a society, but our weakness. No longer do we seek to triumph over “the other”; we now have to triumph over ourselves: humanity needs to radically change in order to survive.<sup>2</sup> This notion requires new forms of solidarity. Durkheim’s “mechanical solidarity” within the “collective conscience” might be a pathway towards global solidarity as cultures homogenize just as “organic solidarity” emerging from interdependent labor relationships could foster social cohesion—especially in the globalized world, where one large container ship getting stuck in the Suez Canal threatens the global supply chain. Yet both appear to have created very limited global solidarity and sometimes even led to polarization. There could be another foundation for global solidarity built upon our shared vulnerability. I suggest, for want of a better term, calling this “somatic solidarity,” which is not seated in the “collective conscience,” but in the “collective heart.”

## Somatic Solidarity

Somatic solidarity I see as a form of social cohesion that emerges in the global society and that refers to an increasing awareness of (a) the intrinsic fragility of the human body and (b) of “humanity as one body,” within the “collective heart.” With its strong emphasis on the mind, seventeenth-century thinking has neglected what makes us human too: our physicality and our relationships, both fostering empathy and compassion. As the pandemic demonstrates, we are intrinsically connected and dependent on each other on a bodily or indeed physical level. Because you are ill, I might become ill. Because you are suffering, I might suffer. I exist, not because I think, but because I am a part of a web of relationships: even in disconnection, even in solitude, even in isolation. I exist because you delivered a pizza. Somatic solidarity in the sense of “humanity as one body” as part of the “collective heart” would have created a very different recent past. The Ebola outbreak in West Africa in 2014 was mostly perceived as a deadly virus that affected “them,” not “us.” How different would the epidemic have been treated as the “collective heart” would have urged us to think, “We are ill! Because Sierra Leone is ill, we are ill. Because Sierra Leone suffers, we suffer. We are one.” We would have learned lessons that would have prepared us better for the pandemic.

## The Significant Other of Humanity

If we perceive humanity as one body, our relationship with the land fundamentally changes. Global solidarity differs in another fundamental aspect from those mechanisms of solidarity creating social cohesion in national societies. For in the context of a fatherland, there is always another country to conquer, to dominate, to assimilate, to plunder. The borders and hence the identity of the fatherland are always more or less contested. The opportunity for new conquests remains open, should we need resources. But the borders of the Earth are not contested, and her resources are not limitless. Mother Earth, as the significant other of “Humanity as One Body” prompts us to examine our relationship with the land that feeds us—in terms of harmony, balance and ultimately, peace. In the process, we will be transformed. For the better. Those are, I suggest, the new “politics of impossibility.” And if humanity can expand global—somatic—solidarity in our “collective heart” to the ends of the Earth, perhaps we do not need a Martian attack, after all.

## Endnotes

1. Martha Van der Bly, "Pananthropoi – Towards a Society of All-Humanity," *Globality Studies Journal* 37 (September 2013), written in Spring 2006.

2. Ibid.

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## About the Author



Martha Van Der Bly is an actress and independent filmmaker. Her company, Rose Rebel Productions, produces films that explore themes of common humanity and shared human destiny. Previously, she was Research Fellow at the Erasmus University Rotterdam, Visiting Fellow at the London School of Economics, and Honorary Visiting Fellow of City University London. Her research has won awards from the Royal Irish Academy, the World Society Foundation in Zurich, and the Boekman Foundation in Amsterdam. She holds a PhD in sociology from Trinity College Dublin.

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