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# ON SOLIDARITY: GRAMSCI'S OBJECTIVITY AS A CORRECTIVE TO BUBER'S I-IT

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## abstract

*I and Thou sets out a dichotomy of human interactions between the merely objective I-It and the intense intersubjective relationship of the I-Thou, creating a problem of how one is to differentiate the I-It relations that are healthy and natural, and those that are limiting and detrimental. As a corrective to this ambiguity, I posit the principle of solidarity as a relation which retains the personhood of the Other yet still confines it to what Buber calls the I-It "relation". To do this I will discuss similar attitudes such as sympathy and camaraderie using them to draw out the meaning of solidarity in contradistinction to them, and show how solidarity functions as Gramsci's Objectivity.*

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## keywords

*Martin Buber, Antonio Gramsci, intersubjectivity, objectivity, solidarity*

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*Rather the house of man about which he is concerned now stands between houses, between neighboring houses, between the houses of his neighbors* (Buber, 2002, pp. 94-95).

**1. Introduction** Eric Mohr points out in his work “Mixing Fire and Water: A Critical Phenomenology” (2016) that the social role of phenomenology will be a key feature to the future of phenomenological research. Mohr seeks to accomplish this by bringing together the social analysis of Critical Theory, with the phenomenological method of Max Scheler, into a “critical phenomenology”. As the field of critical phenomenology grows<sup>1</sup> it will be necessary to consider more in depth the notions of community and solidarity from within the perspective of phenomenology. Key to a social understanding of phenomenology is the personalist phenomenological tradition, which Mohr obviously appreciates as evidenced by his reliance on Scheler. However, if one is to understand the particularly social aspects of phenomenology, it is important to return to their dialogical roots. As such, this paper will seek to explore the value as well as the limitations of Buber’s account of community and social interaction. In this way, this paper is also a work of Critical Phenomenology, working to bring into dialogue the Dialogical analysis of Buber with the social theory of Gramsci, and to use the interaction of their thought as a way of investigating the idea of solidarity and community.

In *I and Thou*, Martin Buber sets out a dichotomy of human interactions between the merely objective view of the I-It, which calculates and measures, and the intense intersubjective relationship of the I-Thou. This distinction creates a problem of how one is to differentiate the various sorts of I-It “relations”. Some I-It relations are clearly healthy and natural, while others are limiting and detrimental to human interaction. As a corrective measure to the ambiguity of Buber’s work, I posit, over the course of this paper, the principle of solidarity as a non-I-Thou relation which retains the dignity and personhood of the Other in a way that still confines it to what Buber calls the I-It “relation”. To do this, I will discuss similar attitudes such as sympathy and camaraderie, and use them to draw out the meaning of solidarity in contradistinction to them. In drawing out solidarity, I will also address the meaning of community, with particular attention paid to Buber’s understanding of community. Buber’s distinction between the living dynamic existence of community and merely useful organization of collective, which he derives from the It/Thou distinction, provides the basis

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<sup>1</sup> Evidenced by the inauguration of the new *Journal of Critical Phenomenology* this year.

for a strong critique of ideological thought (Buber, 2002, p. 35). In this way, Buber's dialogical thought is always a careful and helpful resource in avoiding a kind of social or personal dogmatism which hinders discourse and continued thought. His rejection of over-systematic thought allows for his analysis to dig into the fabric of individual experiences and arrive at conclusions as they are found, rather than speculated about. In this way, Buber's work serves as a means to avoid ever being too comfortable with one's thought.

The interpersonal nature of the relationship of solidarity seems to throw a wrench into Buber's program, since for Buber it is clear that the I-It is not properly a "relation"; instead, the I-It is fundamentally a material interaction, rather than an interpersonal one. I will view Buber through the lens of the rejection of materialism by Antonio Gramsci, as well as view Gramsci through the lens of Buber's discussion of community and his rejection of Marxism. In Gramsci's revised view of the relationship between man and the material, which requires a community with others to develop the ways of relating to the world, there is now room for solidarity in even the material interactions of mankind. Through all of this, I will attempt to address the ambiguity of the I-It and posit solidarity as a corrective.

*I and Thou* (Buber, 1970) creates a fruitful lens for analyzing personal interaction with the world as a whole and with fellow-persons in particular. Buber starts by saying that the "basic word I-It can never be spoken with one's whole being" (1970, p. 54). To begin in this way is central to the claim of the book that the I-It is not entirely human. Were this dichotomy correct, then it would be obvious from the language Buber uses to describe the two that the I-It is sub-human, or at the very least sub-personal, in the fact that the I-It does not allow one to speak with one's "whole being". The language Buber uses to continue his discussion of the I-It would seem to back up this idea. He says that in the I-It "man goes over the surface of things and experiences them" (1970, p. 55).

Thus taken, the I-Thou is far superior. It was even contended by Buber's contemporary Rosenstock-Hussey (1958) that his dichotomy of It/Thou made his work a kind of Gnosticism and sought to bring the It into the I-Thou relation itself to avoid this problem (Theunissen, 1984, p. 265). Yet, Buber states that "I-It does not come from evil" (1970, p. 95). In this, Buber makes it clear that the distinction between the I-It and the I-Thou is not necessarily a moral one. Still, if one considers all the morally deficient ways of relating to another person, it's clear that they fit within the I-It framework. Certainly, one cannot have a relationship with another person wherein they treat the Other as a mere means, or an object of pleasure, within the relationship of the I-Thou, with all its unspeakable reverence for the centrality of the personhood of the Other. So, while the I-It is not necessarily an immoral mode of relating to the Other, certainly all morally deficient modes of relating to the Other are *necessarily* I-It "relations".<sup>2</sup> This creates a baffling ambiguity in Buber's work. There is a difference between the I-It relations which are morally objectionable, and those that are "natural" in Buber's account. Yet, his work seems to leave this question completely unaddressed.

If the Ego is the only possible "I" of the I-It, then it seems that Buber has made a very particular and strong condemnation of the I-It mode of being. How then does one maintain that the I-It does not arise from evil? It seems unreasonable to think that such a morally questionable, if not outright immoral, way of relating to the Other could possibly belong to a "basic word" which is not in some way also morally bankrupt. All the same, Buber still contends quite vehemently that there is nothing immoral about the I-It, and that it is a basic

## 2. The Ambiguity of the I-It

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<sup>2</sup> I hesitate to use the term 'relation' regarding I-It, because it's clear that for Buber only the I-Thou is a "relation". However, for lack of a better term 'relation' will have to be used here.

and natural way of relating to the world around us. He even goes so far as to say that “without It a human being cannot live” (1970, p. 85). Leaving the moral question unanswered, Buber seems content with holding fast to the notion that there’s nothing wrong with the I-It. There is another problem which arises from Buber’s description of the I-It/I-Thou make-up of human experiences of the Other. Not only must there be some specific part of the I-It which is not immoral (since Buber is careful to make clear that it is not), there must also be a specific part of the spectrum of I-It that forms the basis for I-Thou relationships. While the distinct ontological primacy of the I-It cannot be established by Buber’s work, it would seem natural enough to assume that there is a certain temporal primacy to the I-It, as that would be the most common initial reaction to Other persons. Even if one does not hold to the temporal primacy of the I-It, thus making the I-Thou entirely primary, there still has to be a sort of I-It which allows for the oscillation back into the I-Thou. Buber offers nothing by way of examination into what it is in the I-It which might allow the I-Thou to be achieved. It seems perfectly reasonable to contend that for Buber there is a sort of I-It which precludes the I-Thou and stands as an impediment to the development of that real relationship; however, there must be a kind of I-It which is not an affront to the dignity of the person, from the vantage-point of which one may have the I-Thou.

For this problem, there can be only one solution: that there are distinctions within the I-It relationship which Buber has, for whatever reason, ignored altogether. While I will not set out here to discover all the distinct variants of the I-It, I will attempt to understand one possible variant. This variant, I would argue, is the basis for the growth of the I-Thou, or at the very least, should one deny any possible primacy of the I-It, the ability to oscillate successfully between the two. In this role, I would suggest the specific relationship of Solidarity as the most fitting candidate.

### **3. Buber and Community**

In Buber’s work, the notion of community is described in very simple terms, as he claims that “a people is community to the extent that it is communally disposed” (1967, p. 67). At first glance this does very little to elucidate the meaning of the term in Buber’s usage, but it provides a good outline for Buber’s thought on community, that a community is formed whenever the members of the group in question begins to think, actively, of themselves as a community, to reflect from the depths on that which grounds it (Buber, 1967, p. 211). This is what separates the ideas of collective and community in Buber’s work: a collective is simply an organization ordered toward a goal, and a community is an organism “struggling for its own reality as a community” (Buber, 2002, p. 35).

Understood in this way, it is easy to see why Buber bases his understanding of community in the idea of “mutuality” (Theunissen, 1984, pp. 274-278). Community requires the intentional participation of all members. Mutuality seems to make community a dialogical venture, in the way that Buber claims it to be. Thus taken, the community is an I-Thou relationship, while the collective is an I-It. This need not mean that the collective (working with others towards a goal) is bad, but that it is insufficient, just as the I-It is insufficient in the interpersonal sphere generally. The I-Thou requirement for community means that there either must be an I-Thou interaction between each of the members, which would limit communities down to incredibly small groups, or else it must be an I-Thou relationship between the individual and the community itself. The communal “Thou” aspect in Buber’s thought is part of what leads Susser to claim that Buber is best understood within the Volkish Tradition (Susser, 1977, pp. 75-95). While it may be true that there is a particular and strong type of community which relates to itself as an I-Thou, there must be a kind of base-level of interaction which forms the groundwork for this type of relationship to the community. It is this type of community interaction that I want to call solidarity.

Solidarity must be a kind of I-It attitude. This seems counterintuitive, since solidarity is always solidarity-with, yet it would be inappropriate to claim that it belongs, in Buber's language, to the I-Thou. Certainly, solidarity requires a recognition of value which seems out of place within the I-It as Buber explains it, but its universality and the fact that it requires no truly "direct" contact with the Other makes it an unfit candidate for the category of the I-Thou. As such, it must be an I-It relation, yet its particular moral and interpersonal content makes it a much more interesting case for the notion of the I-It than the ones outlined in Buber's work. In order to really understand solidarity's relationship with the I-Thou, and its place in the I-It, it will be necessary to give some attention to the notion of "solidarity".

David Heyd's description of solidarity is that it is a "local, partial and reflective emotion" (2015, pp. 55-64). Throughout his analysis, he is careful to make a sharp distinction between solidarity, justice, and sympathy. All too often these concepts are confused. It is a fair confusion, since solidarity is often the way in which one works towards justice, and it is reasonable to feel a sort of sympathy for those who are oppressed by injustice. All the same, they must be kept definitively separate as ideas. Solidarity cannot be said to be a sort of sympathy, since it does not require a "feeling" of the same emotional/mental state as the one with whom you feel solidarity. One expresses solidarity most impressively when one is not the victim of any oppression, but is still willing to act in solidarity with one who is being oppressed. However, there is still a sense in which solidarity arises out of a recognition of the unity of persons, such that in a certain respect one expresses solidarity because one knows that the struggles of the Other affect them. This is the basis for the old union mantra "an injury to one is an injury to all".

Despite the profound insights of Heyd, there is still a problem in his description of solidarity. Heyd contends that solidarity is an emotion. This seems to be the prevailing view among contemporary research on the topic. Certainly, this has a particular reasonability, in that one may without a doubt say that they "feel solidarity", but I would suggest that this is not a true description of solidarity. Instead, it seems that the feeling described as "solidarity" is rather the emotion of camaraderie. Solidarity is rather the willingness to sacrifice for the perceived community. In this regard, Karol Wojtyla's work *The Acting Person* provides an exquisite description of solidarity in much the same terms, saying "'Solidarity' means a constant readiness to accept and to realize one's share in the community because of one's membership within that particular community" (1979, p. 285).

Another problem in Heyd's description of solidarity is that of its apparent partiality. It is true that there is something class-based about solidarity, but that does not mean that it is necessarily "partial", and especially not necessarily antagonistic. The community based nature of solidarity, the sense of responsibility, lends itself to the notion of antagonism within any social or economic system which is based on antagonism. Thus, solidarity in oppressed communities becomes clearly antagonistic. Yet, an interesting feature of solidarity is that it need not be antagonistic.

Heyd does not seem to understand the difference between particular expressions of solidarity, strikes, boycotts, and so on, and solidarity itself. Solidarity, if it is to mean anything more than an emotional state of experiencing camaraderie, must be present before the expression of solidarity. A worker does not go on strike in a sudden fit of solidarity towards his fellow workers, but because the commitment of solidarity is already present between them. This however, would seem to create something of a problem in my thesis that solidarity is a form of the I-It "basic word". The basic words, in Buber's usage, are pre-ethical relations to the world. There is something more ontological than just an ethical commitment to the notion of solidarity, in that its basis is community. To explain the way in which the community is the ground-work of the I-It, I will need to address the works of Antonio Gramsci.

**5. Gramsci, Objectivity, and Buber**

While it may seem that the more abstract or metaphysical notion of materialism is not pertinent to the deeply personal and intersubjective concept of the “basic words” in Buber, it is worth noting that for Buber, material is the basis of the I-It. Buber’s contention that the I-It is of the material world would seem to disarm any attempt to claim solidarity, a necessarily intersubjective relation, is a form of the I-It “relation”. However, that is only within the particularly reductionistic account of material reality as understood by the doctrinaire materialists. As such, it is worthwhile to consider the ways in which one may approach the notion of material being, to understand the ways in which one may rightfully approach the I-It.

Gramsci’s view of the material dialectics within Marx’s writings is peculiar (Kearney, 1993, pp. 171-173). For Gramsci, this conception of the interaction between economics and society is not only too simplistic, it cannot even rightly be called a “dialectic” in any meaningful sense. Thus, Gramsci rejects this notion of materialism, claiming it to be little more than fatalism, or even a bizarre theism wherein the material world is a sort of pantheistic “god”, whose laws are followed absolutely, and which reduces human decision and community to nothing more than deterministic laws of physics playing out in a specific way (1971, p. 665).

In rejecting this doctrinaire materialist view, Gramsci is faced with a problem: he must maintain the material dialectic of Marx. He wishes to keep the two parts of the dialectic, the base and the superstructure, suspended in relation, and not allow either one of them to totally overtake the other. Were Gramsci to insist on idealism in the strict sense, that would invalidate the dialectic. Instead of this simple assertion, Gramsci makes a much more complicated and nuanced claim. Culture is, for Gramsci, the grounding of the dialectical relation between the base and the superstructure in the Marxian material dialectic. This may seem strange since in common Marxian analysis the culture is distinctly part of the superstructure, but for Gramsci, the culture is not merely a product of the economic structures, but is instead a functional part of the creation of those economic structures and the philosophical and social entities which form the “superstructure” of the dialectic (1971, pp. 376-379).

The exact features of this interplay come from a complicated sociological analysis, and would not be entirely appropriate to this paper, however it suffices for now to say that Gramsci makes the addition of a heavy emphasis on culture to the Marxist view of politics (1971, pp. 765-766). Not that this is absent from Marx or from the Marxist tradition prior to Gramsci, but that in his work, it takes on the additional role of being the objective foundation of community. Taken as such, Gramsci’s view is that the material, objective basis of a community is fundamentally an intersubjective reality. Thus, the solidarity, the recognition of oneself as a part of a community and the willingness to sacrifice for that community is itself also an intersubjective, but material, objective reality.

Buber was certainly not a Marxist; he rejects Marx outright saying that he does “not believe in Marx’s ‘gestation’ of the new form of society” (2002, p. 92). It is, in fact, the non-personal element of Marx’s view which he rejects more clearly. The notion that the world is simply functioning apart from human activity, he rejects and labels as *Apocalyptic* to which he opposes his own *Prophetic* view, that the new form of society must be brought about by human action, and not in spite of it (Silberstein, 1990, pp. 188-189). He is unabashed in claiming himself as a “Utopian Socialist”, a term of scorn in Marxist circles (Buber, 1958, p. 10). However, unlike the bulk of the “utopian socialists” whom Marx criticizes who were called such for their apparent refusal to interact with the given conditions of the world, Buber is clear that “we must be quite unromantic, and, living wholly in the present, out of the recalcitrant material of our own day in history, fashion a true community” (Buber, 1958, p. 15).

This would seem to make the interaction between Buber and Gramsci’s thought somewhat more outlandish, but this need not be the case. Buber’s “utopian” and “volkish” vision

of socialist revolution may be understood as a socialism which appreciates the central importance of social institutions and cultural cohesion as the force for organization (Susser, 1977, pp. 88-90). Thus, in his rejection of Marxism, he is upholding the social, rather than the political, as the central force for organization (Buber, 1958, p. 82). While Gramsci is still a Marxist, his rejection of doctrinaire materialism puts him in a very similar position to that of Buber. Instead of simply focusing on political action and armed conflict, Gramsci's interpersonal view of the material dialectic makes his analysis similarly focused on the social center and on the institutions of a community as the "Prophetic" center of social change. Considered in Gramsci's way, the objective, or material, is a dialectic between the rote material of the world, in connection to a large, complex series of intersubjective relations. These relations are intersubjective in that they are produced by no single individual on their own, but only through the interaction with the ideas of the society as a whole. In this way, Gramsci's view of the dialectic requires a sense of solidarity in the way that I have explained it order to maintain its structural integrity. Solidarity, in Wojtyla's language, is the recognition of the community, and the willingness to do what is necessary for the good of the community. Culture requires this internalized notion of community as well. Thus, for there to be any "objectivity" in Gramsci's usage, there must be a conception of oneself as belonging to a community. Here, there is a distinct case of an I-It "relation" which is both entirely objective and open to the personhood of other human beings. More than simply open to it, the personhood of the Other is entirely necessary for this view. Without it, there would be no way to formulate a notion of community, in which the specific content of an entity in Gramsci's analysis can express itself.

It can thus be seen that solidarity is an acceptable corrective to the ambiguity of the I-It in Buber's work. Solidarity shows itself as a separate experience than that of emotion or of sympathy, but rather as a recognition of the existence of a community, of one's place within it, and the readiness to sacrifice for that community. However, this highly personal idea of solidarity seemed to have clashed with the contention of Buber that the I-It is primarily material. Through Gramsci, it can be seen that even the most mundane and material of objects is related to any human being through a complicated system of intersubjective relations which make up the "community", or what he calls "objectivity". Even though Buber and Gramsci do not ultimately agree on the subject of Marx, they do both still retain the core idea that it is the social and communal element which makes up the change in society. This agreement means that for both Buber and Gramsci, the material, objective basis of the community is in the common social features. Solidarity has been distinguished from similar emotions such as camaraderie, as well as from the I-Thou in Buber. Unlike the critique of Rosenstock-Hussey, this view retains the distinction and stability of the I-It/I-Thou relations as Buber explains them. Thus taken, solidarity makes itself distinct as an I-It relation which is open to, and even in some ways reliant upon, the deep interpersonal relation of the I-Thou. Solidarity, distinct from the obvious negative Egoism that the I-It can take the form of, stands as a morally beneficial way of "relating" to the Other in a way which does not require the same overwhelming singularity of the I-Thou.

## 6. Conclusion

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