

Marianne Takle: Showing social solidarity with future generations

Reviewed by Theresa Eisenmann

“One hand washes the other” and “You scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours” — these familiar proverbs capture the essence of reciprocity, the basis of human cooperation. But what happens when the ‘other hand’ belongs to future generations, unable to give back in any direct sense?

In *Showing social solidarity with future generations*, Marianne Takle challenges us to rethink these age-old notions of reciprocity. Her compelling work examines commitments to consider the concerns of future generations in political decisions, analysing specifically how these commitments are realised in practice. The target audience is primarily scholars, but it also offers insights for policymakers, as it discusses actionable steps to enhance the implementation of institutional bindings for future generations. Marianne Takle, Ph.D., is a research professor in the Department of Health and Welfare Studies at NOVA, Oslo Metropolitan University. Her research initially centred on European integration, migration policies, and cultural studies, but recently has shifted towards intergenerational relations. This book, issued by the renowned publisher Routledge but available for free via an open access licence, builds on her recent work on this topic.

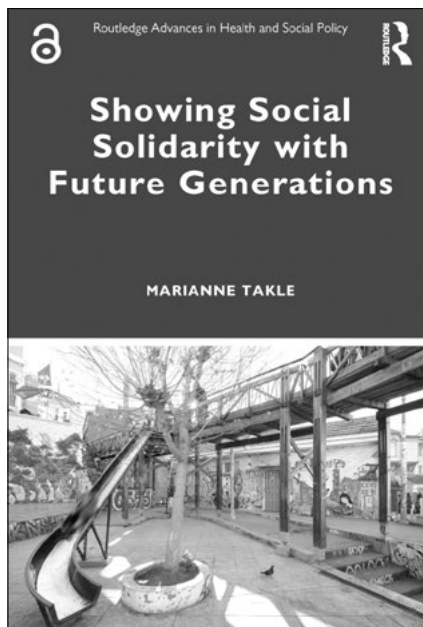
Structured in two parts, it opens with an introduction that establishes the topic’s relevance, defines key concepts, and provides a brief summary. Part 1, *Solidarity in theory*, examines the main theoretical concept of intergenerational solidarity, while part 2, *Solidarity in practice*, offers empirical analyses. The research design involves comparing Germany and Norway across four different policy areas relevant to future generations (the UN’s 2030 Agenda, political institutions, constitutional protection clauses, and budget rules). The overall aim of the book is to develop a concept of solidarity with future generations that can be applied in practice.

In chapter 2, Takle defines solidarity as follows: “Solidarity is based on equality between members of a community. Solidarity should, therefore, be distinguished from charity or care because these are based on hierarchical and vertical relationships between individuals [...]. Furthermore, solidarity is based on the idea that equal individuals should support one another to achieve something collectively and that no one should be left behind or disadvantaged.” (22). For Takle, ‘solidarity’ is based on two dimensions: a) reciprocity and mutual obligations among equal individuals with shared values, goals, or interests; b) people’s willingness to enter collective binding constraints through institutions. She distinguishes between micro-level and macro-level solidarity, and she

asserts that “[a]t the macro level, where people do not meet face to face, solidarity requires a willingness to institutionalise collective action” (21). She adopts Habermas’ discourse-theoretical perspective, viewing solidarity as a forward-looking initiative, described as “a response to something missing and a call for action to rectify this situation” (23). So, what is the difference between solidarity and justice? For Takle, solidarity entails more substantial obligations than justice (23), although this is not much elaborated. Instead, Takle considers various traditions of thought to understand the social norms and practices that motivate people to act in solidarity. An important distinction is made between national solidarity and a new global concept of solidarity “across space and time” (27). Here, she contrasts two normative perspectives: nation state politics and cosmopolitanism. The latter has “a weak collective orientation” (29). She concludes the chapter with a concise summary of its key points, a feature repeated at the end of each chapter throughout the book. These summaries clarify the main arguments, making it easy to follow.

Chapter 3 explores nuanced perspectives on the concept of time. Takle discusses interpretations of temporality, narratives, framing, and how nationalism or cosmopolitanism intersect with these concepts. While this chapter offers valuable insights, some details may feel tangential to the book’s core arguments. For example, the numerous distinctions in generational studies seem hardly relevant to the empirical sections. Although these concepts of temporality are essential for understanding the origins of the arguments, here they may detract slightly from the book’s main focus.

Yet, this is somewhat offset by the following chapter 4, which delves into the essential concept of *solidarity with future generations*. To do this, Takle addresses two pivotal questions: Firstly, how can the idea of reciprocity within a political community include people who are not yet born and cannot give back? Secondly, how can we understand self-imposed institutional constraints when there is no equality between current and future people (46)? In other words, she explores how “You scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours” can be applied across different generations. Takle claims that ‘solidarity’ is a more suitable concept than intergenerational ‘justice’ for assessing current generations’ responsibilities for future generations. She thoroughly examines various perspectives including the non-identity problem, communitarian perspectives, as well as Rawls’ concept of justice as impartiality. She concludes that while these studies are useful for understanding



the complexities concerning future generations, they offer mainly abstract principles and have limited function as analytical tools. Following this, she develops her two-dimensional concept of solidarity with future generations. The first dimension, reciprocity, is reframed as 'indirect reciprocity', which means giving something to a person, but it is not the same person who gives something in return. This poses a number of challenges: in situations of indirect reciprocity between generations, it can be difficult to decide whether someone wins or loses from the exchange, and the exchange rate might be influenced by external factors. She concludes that indirect reciprocity needs to take uncertainty into account. This leads to her second dimension of solidarity, namely 'willingness', where she argues that establishing and maintaining political institutions can stabilise systems based on uncertainty. Willingness implies the establishment of self-imposed institutional bindings to ensure that governments endorse and sustain measures to safeguard future-oriented goals. To clarify this point, she discusses the concept of political commitment devices, noting that the four types of self-imposed institutional constraints analysed in the book serve as such devices.

In part 2 of the monograph, Takle uses this concept of solidarity as a lens for conducting empirical analysis. She poses the following questions about the requirements for showing social solidarity with future generations: "(i) What do the commitments to future generations involve? (ii) How binding are the commitments for future generations when implemented in institutional practice? (iii) What other societal concerns are in tension with the institutional bindings for the sake of future generations?" (57).

Chapter 5 examines the UN 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), signed by all 193 UN member states. Takle finds that the practical impact of the Agenda is limited, despite the dedication to future generations in its preamble: none of the 17 SDGs mention future generations, and the agenda lacks enforceable authority over nation states' policies. Although the common frame and the monitoring of the progress establish moral obligations, the commitments remain weak, revealing the challenge of implementing global institutional bindings in practice. Chapter 6 shifts the focus to existing national political institutions for future generations. Takle identifies two types: one to ensure the implementation of the SDGs, and the other to ensure future generations are politically represented.

In chapter 7, Takle examines national constitutional protection clauses for future generations and how they are tested by climate lawsuits. Takle analyses Germany's Article 20a of the Basic Law and Article 112 of the Norwegian Constitution alongside relevant climate lawsuits. She concludes that while these clauses contribute to reframing the state's responsibility toward future generations, their institutional bindings are weak.

Chapter 8 addresses regulations of economic debt and savings, which are some of the strongest institutional constraints justified by a concern for future generations. Her analysis of Germany's 'debt brake' and Norway's Petroleum Fund fiscal guideline shows that substantial institutional bindings are possible, but they are often vulnerable to adjustments in crises. In addition, these commitments create a dilemma between necessary investments for the future and adhering to debt limits, raising the question about which resources are transferred to future generations.

Finally, Takle concludes that financial constraints are generally more binding than political and legal bindings. The book ends on the note that "[i]nstitutional bindings must be strengthened to show social solidarity with future generations" (158). According

to Takle, her new interpretation of solidarity has proven to be an useful analytical tool.

Takle's book is a valuable read brimming with information and detailed insights. Her dual focus on both theory and practice enriches the discourse, bridging academic approaches and practical applications. She acknowledges that there are a few authors who have developed normative concepts and principles, but these concepts were difficult to apply to empirical studies. This is the research gap Takle intends to close.

In offering an interdisciplinary study, Takle employs theories from philosophy, political science, law studies, and welfare economics in a different way to how they would be used in any mono-disciplinary work in these disciplines. Takle skilfully incorporates established theoretical approaches from various authors. This not only enhances the credibility of her approach but also provides the reader with many opportunities to explore the existing literature on related topics, allowing the reader to explore the multifaceted complexities surrounding 'solidarity'.

Through her critiques of existing content (e.g. theories of intergenerational justice) that she contrasts with her own conceptualisation, she employs arguments to advance her line of reasoning. However, that does not mean that her concept is entirely immune to critique. While the concept of solidarity has its merits, there may be a dark side to it that Takle eschews to mention. She herself writes: "solidarity is often associated with classes, religious groups, social movements, and local communities, where individuals meet and work together for a common cause (...)" (21). This might not always be positive: solidarity might be expressed at the expense of others, putting them in a relatively worse position. For example, solidarity among football fans of a specific club might lead to rivalry with other clubs. Or, at the most basic level, we might think of solidarity within the family. Even if your brother has done a misdeed, you might be inclined to *not* turn him in, because of solidarity. This problem does not arise with the concept of intergenerational justice. Thus, it remains an open question whether 'solidarity' is more suitable than 'justice'.

The book clearly achieves its aim to analyse when and how commitments to future generations are followed up in practice. The findings offer important lessons, although the unique political and social landscapes in Norway and Germany may limit the applicability of these insights beyond the specific cases examined. Furthermore, Takle herself states that the intent of her book is not to predict the future. This can be somewhat disappointing, as her empirical findings present a rather pessimistic outlook. Even in countries like Germany and Norway, which theoretically have many institutional bindings already, these bindings are ultimately weak. This raises pressing concerns for the reader, who is left to question whether the various approaches to implementing solidarity with future generations can realistically effect meaningful change, or if the presentist voters, and politicians following suit, prevent this from happening.

Overall, *Showing Social Solidarity with Future Generations* very successfully illuminates many important issues concerning solidarity with future generations, making it a significant contribution to the discourse while inviting further reflection and research on its findings and implications.

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