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Mutual aid, solidarity, and classics in higher education

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Mutual Aid, Solidarity, and Classics in Higher Education

Sportula Europe

Abstract: This paper describes the efforts of the microgrant organisation, Sportula Europe, to offer material support as well as the kinship of solidarity to historically-looted and marginalised communities within Classics. Contextualising our work within critical intellectual traditions and the history of mutual aid practices, we reflect upon non-hierarchical approaches to ameliorate the material conditions of students and researchers in our field.

Keywords: microgrant organisations, mutual aid, solidarity, Sportula Europe.

Introduction and Background

This essay is a brief introduction to the activities of Sportula Europe during our first year, concurrent to the first phases of the COVID-19 pandemic, and to the values of mutual aid and solidarity which underpin our work. It emphasises our continuity and similarities with other mutual aid and microgrant organisations, and the way that our model differs from some of these groups, particularly in its long-term picture. 2020's *Res Diff* conference had a strong focus on pedagogical interventions, and 2021's programme showed a similar interest; our intervention was one of the few which didn't touch directly upon teaching and learning. Rather, we looked at the material circumstances and communities which are necessary to make teaching and learning possible across institutions and disciplines, to help people from historically-looted and marginalised communities to survive and thrive in a field which is often exclusionary, in institutions of higher education which are built for specific (white, middle-class, able-bodied, and often cisgender male) audiences. This was our first time presenting as a group, and in fact the first time that we all had our names publicly associated with Sportula Europe. Up until this point, we had maintained anonymity, partly because this initiative relies just as much on the people who give us donations as it does on our small committee, and partly because we were worried about the potential backlash which can target marginalised groups discussing inequity in academia, given the shameful treatment of the founders of the US-based The Sportula at the 2019 Society for Classical Studies Annual Meeting in San Diego.[1]

Our work as Sportula Europe takes direct inspiration from The Sportula, a microgrant initiative launched in early 2018 by a group of graduate students and ECRs based predominantly in the United States.[2] Although we are fully independent from The Sportula, we owe our existence to them, both because they paved the way for microgrant and solidarity work in Classics by showing how successful such an initiative could be—without having to compromise on its key values—and because we only came together as a European collective after The Sportula issued a call for a new group based in the UK and Europe. We imitated their structure of a BIPOC-only leadership group, which influences our politics and practices but does not restrict who can receive microgrants. We are indebted to their model

[1] See Quinn (2019). For issues surrounding 'race' and racism in UK Classics more generally, see Dhindsa (2020). For a discussion of these dynamics across the Atlantic, see Umachandran (2019).

[2] See https://thesportula.wordpress.com/; link accessed Feb. 10, 2024.

of sharing the stories of micrograntees on social media (with permission), to highlight the financial difficulties faced by students and scholars in Classics which are often kept secret, as if this were a cause for shame. There are also differences in our practice: we decided early on that we would not be using our own personal funds to finance these microgrants, donating our time and labour instead; and we saw an urgent need to fill a gap in the representation of people of colour and discussions about race and ethnicity in Classics. The UK has only one Black professor of Classics and only a handful of Asian heritage; while groups and societies of Classics students of colour have arisen in recent years, there are no national organisations like MRECC (Multiculturalism, Race & Ethnicity in Classics Consortium), the Mountaintop Coalition or AAACC (The Asian and Asian American Classical Caucus); and in terms of higher education more broadly, the UK and Europe do not have historically Black colleges and universities, nor is there a long history of Black or Africana Studies departments—the first Black Studies course in Europe was established at Birmingham City University, UK, in 2017.

Four out of the five of us were raised in the UK and studied for our undergraduate degrees at UK institutions, so both our analyses and our reach tend to be heavily weighted towards the UK. However, we receive and fulfill microgrant requests from continental Europe (including areas which are not part of the Eurozone) and have responded to a growing number of requests from Asia and Africa. We also make a point of hosting translations of our website in a range of different languages (expanding beyond the exclusionary dominance of specific 'scholarly languages'). Nevertheless, most of our requests have been from students in the UK. Similarly, although we take a broad definition of ancient world studies and have never turned away a microgrant request for being outside of our subject area, we have found it hard to shake off the mental constraints of conventional disciplinary boundaries. Expanding our networks is a priority for the near future. In what follows of this essay, we will set out the principles of mutual aid and solidarity that have guided us in our efforts so far, before thinking about what the future holds for projects such as ours in the future of Classics.

Mutual Aid

There is a significant distinction between the kind of organising we do as a mutual aid group and the emergency relief efforts that appeared in 2020 to help with COVID-related financial burdens. We laud the efforts of, for example, the Women's Classical Caucus and the Women's Classical Committee on both sides of the Atlantic, Classics for All for their efforts to meet the unexpected and unusual costs that students met with from March 2020 onwards, including moving housing suddenly, paying for flights home, making backup plans suddenly, losing access to libraries and archives, etc. While we met and set up Sportula Europe in the context of the COVID pandemic, we take our organizational principles and starting points from understanding that the crises that COVID has revealed are not new but exacerbated and exposed by the pandemic. So while emergency relief funds are a welcome Band-Aid, they imply that the systems in which we were working prior to the pandemic were operating fine, or within tolerable parameters, or tending to improve. We also aim to foster a network of support organised on a non-hierarchical basis; for example, during the height of the pandemic we sought to foster community through online meet-ups. While material support is essential, so is a sense of kinship.

As a group of people who live at various intersections of social marginalization (as well as privilege), we know for ourselves through our lived experience and our witnessing of the

world and academic institutions in the last ten years, that the narrative of progressive improvement just is not true.[3] In the UK the austerity cuts to the public sector have determined and impacted our lives from the moment that we set foot in 'higher education'. So what we do as a mutual aid group within academia addresses the system-wide failures that compound systemic pressures, stresses, and harms on the bodies of black and brown, queer, disabled people. At its most ambitious, Sportula Europe imagines new ways of surviving and thriving together, orientated towards racial and economic justice. And that, to say the least, is not a short-term goal or one circumscribed to reacting only to the immediately present disaster of the global pandemic.

So what is mutual aid, if not emergency relief? Again it's not an accident that the first time that mutual aid entered the wider cultural conversation, beyond radical and activist circles, was in 2020, when states seemed slow or powerless or actively collaborating to make worse the kinds of large scale problems with which people were dealing. Dean Spade (2020, 3-4) recounts that on the day when the first COVID-19 case was announced in Hong Kong, some of the protestors who had been in the streets resisting police and the government turned their attentions to creating a website that tracked cases, monitored hotspots, reported hospital wait times, and warned about places selling fake PPE. What this mobilized and coordinated movement was in effect able to do was to implement grassroots political action at the level at which it was needed, in ways that were more effective at containing the first wave of the pandemic than any of government responses.

Another, earlier example of mutual aid that is often adduced to show the necessity and efficacy of grassroots organising, and how threatening it is, is the work of the Black Panthers, originating in Oakland, California. Though widely known and mistaken as *only* a politically militant group in favour of armed self-defence, the much more mundane and quietly radical work of the Panthers is overlooked. They dealt with and tried to improve the material conditions of Black peoples' lives around access to housing, healthcare, and education. Fred Hampton, deputy leader of the Illinois chapter of Panthers, was particularly passionate about the need for children to have a square meal to start the day. And so the Free Breakfast Program was set up. It was for this programme that the director of the FBI, J. Edgar Hoover, dubbed the Black Panthers 'the greatest threat' to the internal security of the country.[4] Why? Not only was it seen by authorities as a powerful means of indoctrination and radicalisation, but it also represented a powerful vision of a different world, a world 'of freely giving more than one expects to receive from his neighbours', to use the formulation of the early Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin in *Mutual Aid* (1902, 299). It is hard to miss the echo of Marcus Rashford, the young Black British footballer leveraging his celebrity to shame the British government into providing adequate food for children during the school closures enforced by the pandemic.[5] The point of both of these examples is that there is a desperate need to see and act beyond the narrowly circumscribed political and life-making activities that states and institutions, job markets and pipelines plunge us into. As Mathura Umachandran observed recently 'capitalism is a death cult that many of us are not supposed to survive'.[6]

[3] See also, for example, Ahmed (2012). For a more recent exploration of the 'nonperformativity' of UK higher education's 'Race Equality Charter', see Bhopal and Pitkin (2020).

[4] Hoover (1969), quoted by Spade (2020, 8).

[5] See Olusoga and Olosuga (2020).

[6] Umachandran, in conversation, undated.

Mutual aid is how we can make new ways of surviving and thriving, having political imagination beyond what is given to us.

That is not to say that we think of ourselves as the Black Panthers! It's to say that we are operating in a long tradition of getting past the strictures of capitalism, as well as colonialism. We could turn to any number of examples by which colonized people have improvised ways to craftily elude imperial surveillance and governance, to help one another get around the concentration of wealth and resources into the hands of the greedy few. And so *solidarity* is the principle at the heart of mutual aid, which in addition to having a longer term and more capacious political framework, sets us apart from emergency funds or outreach grant set ups.

Solidarity

In her book *Feminism Interrupted: Disrupting Power* (2020, 136), Lola Olufemi thinks of solidarity as follows (and it's worth savouring each word, so here's the quotation in full):

> Solidarity is hard to define. In the simplest terms, it can range from: working across difference, standing together in the face of shared oppression and standing alongside those with whom you do not share a common experience of the world. It's a slippery concept, it moves about, it unites and divides the movements we are a part of. A feminist definition might understand solidarity as a strategic coalition of individuals who are invested in a collective vision for the future. At the core of solidarity is mutual aid: the idea that we give our platforms, resources, legitimacy, voices, skills to one another to try and defeat oppressive conditions. We give and take from one another, we become accomplices and saboteurs and disrupters on each other's behalf.

Sportula Europe then has solidarity at its core because we want to redistribute what wealth/resources/attention we have, we who understand ourselves as sharing some common experience of the world as much as of some common experience of discipline and institution. Classics has long regarded itself as a saviour, anointed with preservative functions of civilization. For example, W. E. B. Du Bois' emphasis on a classical, humanistic education as a means for African Americans to become 'co-workers in the kingdom of culture' underpins paternalist, conservative educational philosophies found in US classical charter schools and UK academies.[7] This is often accompanied by a disciplinary self-positioning as being in need of redeeming or saving, as if there is a pure core of Classics that needs recovering. We are not interested in aligning ourselves with either of the sticky ends of the saviour complex. Our shared and overlapping experiences as BIPOC, queer, disabled people in Classics has taught us that unless we make our own space to ensure our mutual survival and flourishing, this discipline will always fit us badly, set us as marginal, or in countless other ways, ensure that we are harmed.

Solidarity also means recognising that we as students and researchers study and work within a world much broader than our discipline or institution. How this recognition is translated into practical action depends much on specific geographical and temporal contexts, but we as Sportula Europe consider there to be a number of unifying features for

[7] See Withun (2022) for a recent example of this Arnoldian perspective on Classics.

thinking about enacting a politics of solidarity in our roles of students, researchers, and teachers of the ancient world.

Firstly, solidarity means not simply bringing more people from more diverse backgrounds into the discipline. Solidarity works to change the discipline and the institution. It is about supporting each other and joining together on a non-hierarchical, spontaneous basis to effect structural change. To return to Fred Hampton, his unique threat to capitalist white supremacy was to bring together different groups who, on the surface, had little in common—the white Young Patriots, the Latin Young Lords, and the Black Panthers—forming a 'Rainbow Coalition' which offered a united front against a common enemy engaged in villainising the working class regardless of skin colour. Of course, this is not to say that all forms of oppression amount to the same thing, but solidarity means identifying common themes in different struggles and areas around which to organise, as well as being available as an ally to struggles different to your own.

As this should hopefully illustrate, solidarity is an altogether different creature from a politics of representation. Solidarity addresses material as well as epistemological conditions. How can one be expected to work or study if one is struggling to make rent, afford the weekly shop, or buy a train ticket home? Often these material struggles are bound up in layers of stigma, especially in a discipline which remains so intensely implicated in class. Solidarity aims to provide a basic level of security to allow our colleagues and friends to feel able to work and thrive. Yet it extends further than this.

As previously highlighted, much of our perspective is skewed towards the UK and what follows reflects this. In the recent book *Empire's Endgame: Racism and the British State* (2021), the authors (Bhattacharyya et al.) draw attention to the inadequacy of such a politics of representation in a university context. Representational politics tends to be centred on those who already have institutional affiliation, as students, employees, and British citizens. Where does this leave outsourced support staff, whose immigration status is sometimes precarious, leaving them open to intimidation and abuse, most obviously seen at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), a college of the University of London.[8] In this case, outsourced cleaning and support staff, many of whom are from Central and South America, and were employed by the contractor ISS, began to organise for safer working conditions and sick pay. In 2009, the college called staff for an emergency meeting in a lecture theatre in SOAS, where forty immigration officers lay in ambush. The cleaning staff were taken away for questioning, and six were forcibly deported from the UK.[9] A campaign arose, demanding that cleaning staff be brought in-house, meaning that they would become employed by the university, rather than predatory, exploitative contractors, affording them the same levels of protection and rights as other university employees. The alliance formed between cleaning staff, students, and academic staff, framed by engagements with histories of colonialism, won a historic victory in securing in-house employment, giving them access to better working conditions and protection. This fight was followed by similar campaigns across the University of London, with skills and expertise gained from the SOAS campaign shared and reshaped for these new contexts. These campaigns, too—at the London School of Economics, King's College London, and Senate House—were successful. When we speak of a 'decolonised university', we need to be clear of what we mean. If, as universities now market the term,

[8] Chakrabortty (2017).

[9] Toscano (2009).

decolonisation simply means more non-white faces and more 'diverse' course readings then, as *Empire's Endgame* (2020, 87) asks, 'who would clean the "decolonised" university'?

Solidarity is not a hagiography of trade union politics. It should be noted that, of the successful cleaners' campaigns, two were carried out under the aegis of non-Trades Union Congress affiliated unions (King's College London and SOAS were represented by Unison). Cleaners at LSE organised with United Voices of the World, a union that specifically works with migrant labour, and cleaners at Senate House were with Independent Workers of Great Britain, a fighting union that is specifically geared towards casualised and precarious workers, many of whom are migrants. Often, larger, more institutionalised unions are themselves fiercely divided, frequently along the lines of job seniority. A recent example from a university context comes from the balloting for the 2019-2020 University and College Union industrial action. Two ballots were presented at the same time: one on work conditions, including precarity and the gender pay gap; and one on a change in pension schemes which would see retiring UK HE staff lose on average 35% of their previously guaranteed pension.[10] At one of our institutions, neither ballot reached the threshold of a 50% response rate on the first attempt for industrial action to be called. When re-balloted, the pension ballot reached the threshold for industrial action, but the ballot over work conditions did not. The ballots were sent together, so this meant that a good number of UCU members felt motivated to protect their pensions (important as it is), but not to stand up for their precarious colleagues, who could only dream of having a meaningful pension, and who are paid unequally depending on their race and gender. These same precarious members are often the ones overwhelmingly represented on the picket lines, since principles of solidarity mean more to them—more than a tick on a ballot box—than the tenured faculty who cannot even be bothered to respond to a ballot in support of their colleagues, so long as they get their pensions.

This is why we, as Sportula Europe, do not solicit the patronage of famous Classicists. Their support may only go so far as to not jeopardise their own positions—although, of course, there are exceptions to this, nor do we hold this against them. We aim to build a non-hierarchical network of solidarity based on the principle that an injury to one is an injury to all, rather than providing a philanthropic outlet for senior colleagues to assuage their underlying guilt. Rather than a model based on unions such as UCU, we see the recent wildcat strikes of Teaching Assistants (TAs) at University of California campuses as an inspiration, bypassing hierarchies and demonstrating the value of their labour by withdrawing it. It is shameful that TAs at a number of UK institutions are not even able to participate in UCU industrial action because they are outsourced workers—like the SOAS cleaners—who do not have the same right to strike, or indeed the same protections, as university employees.

We aim to promote a network of solidarity on a short-term level by distributing microgrants to help to ameliorate the material conditions of students and researchers in our field. In the longer term, we share each other's stories so folks know what the situation is like for different people. We collate resources on our website bibliography—and, increasingly, blog—that foreground marginalised voices, and we aim to amplify BIPOC and LGBT+ voices, conferences, and publications on our social media. We do not want a need for mutual aid or experiences of marginalisation to be considered shameful for the individual involved—it's important to talk openly about these things. Ultimately, our model of solidarity is based on a vision eloquently expressed in a poem immortalised during the 1912

[10] For more on UCU campaigns, visit https://www.ucu.org.uk/campaigns; link accessed Feb. 10, 2024.

Lawrence Millworkers strike, which saw predominantly migrant women with no common spoken language come out against pay cuts and the suppression of women's work: 'hearts starve as well as bodies; give us bread, but give us roses!'

What is to be done, now?

We anticipate that readers will be familiar with the *New York Times Magazine* piece by Rachel Poser on Dan-el Padilla Peralta.[11] Many readers will know of the controversy provoked by Padilla Peralta's interventions. What bears emphasis, though, is how pieces such as this challenge the discipline to move beyond superficial diversity initiatives which still prioritise white comfort. Knee-jerk reactions to the discomfitures provoked by Padilla Peralta's contributions largely ignore his ultimate aims: 'my only rejoinder is that I'm not interested in demolition for demolition's sake. I want to build something.'

Padilla Peralta's vision of building something new chimes with recent calls within the Classics community to 'burn it down.' There is a productive ambiguity in what 'it' is—the discipline of Classics as it currently is, or the structures of white supremacy that are reproduced by certain approaches to the ancient world? Moreover, what does 'burning it down' entail? Supported primarily by BIPOC and underprivileged scholars, this provocative exhortation encourages us to think outside of institutional structures, voice our frustrations, and question the white supremacist origins that underpinned, and continue to underpin, the discipline of Classics—note 'the discipline of Classics', not the study of classical antiquity itself.[12] Criticisms of this metaphor claimed it was too violent a slogan, and at times invoked the idea of being homeless. The result of burning it down, according to some, would be akin to wiping the classical world from the face of the humanities. Resistance to the underlying premise of this exhortation willfully misinterprets calls to confront the institutional racism that is plaguing the field. Rethinking the discipline, as is already being done in many quarters, would reinvigorate the study of the ancient world, bringing into play new perspectives, methodological and theoretical frameworks, and new fields of research, but it would also expose the white supremacy that lies at the foundations of the discipline. A new, more vibrant, more dynamic study of antiquity would emerge from the ashes of the old discipline.[13]

However, we are strongly guided by our commitments beyond the academy. The principle of mutual aid which underpins Sportula Europe's mission can and does go further than informing our practices in seeking to ameliorate the material conditions of students and researchers in our fields. It also offers a dream of a world organized differently. The last few years have seen history lurch between racist state violence and pandemic, 'culture wars' to potential nuclear ones, which would spell the end of the beautiful experiments of humankind—all set against the background of a rapidly accelerating climate crisis. Yet, as scholars of the literatures and cultures of the ancient world and its reception, we ply our trade by immersing ourselves in this particular aspect of the story of our species and its place within the world. We know what we humans are capable of—the beauty and the terror. The *Iliad*, a text placed at the foundation of our discipline, is a poem about war, but has moments of tender poignancy which continue to touch something fundamentally human in us all.

[11] Poser (2021).

[12] See Zuckerberg (2019).

[13] Umachandran and Ward (eds.) (2024).

Athenian tragedy, performed at the peak of Athens' imperial power and set in the palaces of royals, has provided vocabularies and narratological frameworks for struggles against colonialism, racism, and hetero-patriarchy. We can agree with Walter Benjamin that 'there is no document of civilisation which is not at the same time a document of barbarism', yet at the same time we see in these documents of barbarism—from Greek epic to the Colosseum—the embryonic form of a different world of cooperation and solidarity. A new world requires a new humanism which has peeled back the layers of coloniality which envelop humanism as it is, to reveal a more multifaceted, more capacious, more humane core of humanity, living with, not against, the planet. Despite the seeds that have been sown, and the saplings that have thrived and flourished across the continents, such a world may never be built. Indeed, the horizon of possible futures is rapidly being obscured from view. However, be that as it may, the only reasonable remaining course of action is to 'be realistic, demand the impossible', and we do not want to not succeed for lack of trying.

Postscript

In the period since writing this article, the Sportula Europe team have been on hiatus. This has been precipitated by a number of factors. With the COVID lockdowns lifted and life returning to a semblance of normal pace, the pressures of our day-to-day activities squeezed Sportula activities unsustainably. Similarly, managing the finances has proven challenging. This has especially been the case when attempting to distribute microgrants outside of Europe and counties without access to PayPal (many of our requests had been coming from Asia). Additionally, some of our members have moved outside of academia while others of us are lucky in no longer being precariously employed. We believe that Sportula Europe should operate on a 'for us, by us' basis, rather than risk sliding into self-congratulatory charity or box-ticking 'EDI activities'. Others of us are coming to the crunch-time of writing up theses and wrestling with the job market. Our experiences have shown to us that what may have felt very doable in the limbo of lockdown has been less feasible in the period since, especially with a small team dispersed across countries.

We are actively seeking to pass the baton on to others. Those of us with firm institutional affiliations hope to leverage our positions in order to give the best support possible to the future iterations of Sportula Europe.

Yours in solidarity,

Sportula Europe
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