

Review - The Politics of Compassion

Written by Eva Botella-Ordinas

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EVA BOTELLA-ORDINAS, FEB 26 2020

The Politics of Compassion
Edited by Michael Ure and Mervyn Frost
Routledge, 2013

Two notions of politics

This fascinating book examines the role of compassion in international relations from sociological, psychological and political theory perspectives, providing a historical background of the main theories about emotions in politics. It is a major contribution for understanding the politics of humanitarianism and citizens' agency in the current international neo-liberal global order. The book is divided into three parts: the first is focused on the role of compassion within political theory as a potential virtue in current democracies and within the international order; the second part studies the politics of compassion regarding cosmopolitanism from a sociological perspective; and the third analyses the risks of compassion in both domestic and international politics, proposing some solutions. The chapters are written by internationally recognized senior scholars, and each one, within its discipline and case study, analyzes compassion from either a classical liberal conception of politics or, less frequently, a postcolonial feminist point of view (which is neither necessarily constitutional nor liberal) (Straumann, 2016). From feminist postcolonial perspectives, the vulnerable has an active political role, which is generally denied in classical approaches. As the Palestinian Ziadah (2011) protested in her viral poem: "just give us a story, a human story, you see, this is not political...do not mention the word apartheid or occupation."

Transnational interests are not only damaging the already most vulnerable internationally, but also weakening domestic liberal political institutions (intended for ensuring the citizens' liberty, equality and freedom through a distribution of common resources following rational decision-making processes in an alleged free market), making them dysfunctional. To avoid this situation, many scholars such as Martha Nussbaum have been studying the role of active political cosmopolitan citizenship (of the less vulnerable within the system), and analyzing the role of emotions, particularly compassion, aiming to mobilize the people and to make visible the most vulnerable. Compassion has been at the center of Western politics since the Enlightenment, becoming also paramount internationally, at least since anti-cruelty became its alleged primary civilizing concern (Shklar, 1982; cf. Kekes, 1996). But, at the same time, compassion was politically dangerous (classically defined as a partial and visual emotion, felt more for those close and akin) for both threatening cosmopolitanism and for destabilizing the liberal system (involving contagion and other dangerous emotions, such as indignation, anger and revenge).

Compassion: from individualism to the vulnerable interrelated subject

The liberal enlightened intellectual tradition wrote about the role of empathy, sympathy, charity and compassion in national and international politics, concerned about how to make functional an ideal capitalist market. The tension between the individual self-love and common general trust should be balanced through an imagined rational-sensitive but self-contained individual (a white-male-human-proprietor) because when the individual passions, feelings and emotions were overwhelming, they might disrupt the system. Individual sympathy became the emotional balance for politics through humane empathy, along with an awareness of both the potential self-vulnerability (through the spectacle of the more vulnerable), and the actual comfort of being safe spectators of the other's

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misfortune. The overwhelming events of the French revolution were led by “contagious” emotions in politics (especially pity, love or compassion) according to a Thermidorian narrative of the Reign of Terror (supported by Hannah Arendt), because Jacobins justified as necessary many acts of cruelty for the love of humanity (supporting universal rights) (Wahnich, 2012; Merleau-Ponty, 1990). For this reason, Western liberal politics placed a safe interface between the sufferer and the “impartial” but sensitive observers, reacting through benevolence and humanitarianism (a mark of civilization) towards the victims (of the very system), always lower down in the social and moral hierarchy (Dayan, 2007), to the point that by the end of the nineteenth century the repression of these emotional expressions was a scientific civilizing mark (Dupouy, 2011).

Part I assumes compassion’s political partiality and takes the risks, aligning with academics such as Lynn Hunt (2007) or Sofie Wahnich, against Arendt’s theory. While Maureen Whitebrook and Gudrun von Tevenar support the classical and liberal definition of politics without discussing the potential active political role of the subaltern (which remains, classically, a dangerous “victim anger”), they explain that compassionate citizens judge and feel also indignation and anger, acting against systemic injustices (in Whitebrook through Judeo-Christian compassion), and helping to make visible the most vulnerable within the political system (von Tevenar). In contrast with them, Lola Frost understands politics in a feminist and postcolonial way (“indirect and reflexive politics”: Rancière, Merleau-Ponty, Derrida and Levinas), involving agonistic and affective practices of deliberation (with embodied and affective inter-subjectivity), taking into account the political agency of the victims. Citizens, by embodying the victim’s suffering through compassion, can transcend their cultural identities, both becoming inter-related vulnerable subjects in political non-institutional practices, creating both risks and political innovation for the system (through an ethics of generosity). The recent explosion of the extreme-right movements in the West, connected to the disempowered citizens unable to feel compassion for the distant other, might find a balance in the liberal promotion of the “economy of the gift”, “social economies” or “solidarity economies” (which neoliberal face is the “economy for the common good”, Felber, 2015). This part could have benefited by including more of this feminist and postcolonial approach; nevertheless, the current conservative turn in international politics makes its critical approach within liberal politics a success.

The troubled virtuous compassionate

The second part studies the sociology and social psychology of compassion in domestic and global politics. Linklater and MacDonald argue that compassion is partial and linked to identity, and the economy of reciprocity and dependence, not of generosity. Andrew Linklater finds it easier to extend cosmopolitan compassion to alleviate suffering when citizens feel shame and self-restraint, taking into account the interests of the passive vulnerable (like in the case of the abolitionist or anti-cruelty movements). Linklater’s chapter magisterially summarizes the enlightened interpretation of compassion and sympathy’s effects on the domestic and the international domains, for instance, in Adam Smith’s thought, who proposed to keep a safe emotional distance to maintain the norms of justice and economy (in line with Elias’s “Civilizing Process,” linking compassion to exchange, identity, and appropriate behavior). Linklater agrees with this enlightened and liberal reading of compassion, making the vulnerable apolitical. For Terry MacDonald, compassion is a constant in international relations, and he analyzes and criticizes the conception-based and compassionate models of moral motivation. Compassion is responsible for creating new cosmopolitan political institutions (such as NGOs) with the support of bottom-up local cooperative social relationships of mutual care. Likewise, Mervyn Frost discusses the principles informing humanitarian aid and intervention, the need of compassion’s redistribution and its difficult transformation into cosmopolitan actions which alleviate effectively those who suffer undeservedly (through compassion’s ethical judgements of seriousness and desert).

“Compassion fatigue” is one of the major problems of the current international order, due to the global context of enormous suffering and its media coverage through images. The Palestinian Ziadah (2011) expressed it in the verse: “Today my body was a TV’d massacre.” This section of the book deals with this problem from several angles. Early modern and modern written and visual discourses on sentiments aimed to avoid cruelty and to foster the common good (for instance, anti-slavery and feminist “sensationalist” literature), in contrast to those who perceived them as obscene distant entertainments (like current televised wars) (Halttunen, 1995) to be avoided through rational scientific discourses. Nicholas Faulkner studies the crucial political role and effectiveness of compassionate anger in

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intergroup helping (in line with Whitebrook), because it is easily focused on others' suffering and it involves higher levels of psychological arousal, challenging the specific causes of suffering with concrete actions. Iain Wilkinson analyses mass dissemination of images of suffering and their use by modern humanitarian social movements to educate moral sentiments (pity, compassion and sympathy), avoiding compassion fatigue through solidarity. Wilkinson embraces sentimentality, following a feminist approach to politics, because it reveals unequal power relations and it promotes critical thinking. Thus, the second part provides a sound discussion about "compassion fatigue."

Compassion on stage

The third part of the book engages the reader in critical compassion, paying attention to its risks and how to avoid them identifying inappropriate sentiments, balancing them with other emotions and evaluating planned actions on behalf of the victims to ensure that they benefit from them. Michael Ure studies Adam Smith's non-moral motives and his neo-Stoic therapy to lower the passions (particularly compassion, due to its partiality), and claims that human sympathy must acknowledge human vulnerability. Joanne Faulkner's magnificent chapter shares with Lola Frost the postcolonial and feminist approach to politics, taking into account the Rancièrian 'distribution of the sensible' and 'an aesthetic regime of politics.' Compassion, for the canonical enlightenment tradition and the paternalistic humanitarian discourse, requires a passive attitude by the rational and irresponsible audience towards the distant scene of suffering. Without a fair distribution of the sensible (not knowing neither the asymmetry between victims and those benefiting from their suffering, nor the specific interests and agency of the victims), compassion is inefficient and dangerous, particularly when the interests of the victims and the offenders are opposite (an everyday fact in postcolonial societies), argues Faulkner. Thus, desert and responsibility are then paramount for developing critical compassion. David Konstan studies pity and forgiveness around compassion in a classical understanding of politics and believes that the share in suffering between the sufferer and the observer prevents an ethical judgement towards the wrongdoers, who might repent and become legally irresponsible.

Because compassion is a visual emotion and images compel us to act, it has been explored since classical times as a political-civic tool in theatre; the chapters by Martha Nussbaum, Muldoon and Noyes discuss this tradition. Dorothy Noyes concludes that clemency, like compassion, mixes the personal and the political because it is generated through shared emotions among unequal humans, enabling the clement sovereign to offer a "formal reincorporation to the formal offender" (210). In the international scene, the old absolutist ruler might mirror current distant politicians (with the abyss of power between them and their victims), who, through clemency, could mitigate their societies' 'compassion fatigue.' Focusing on the citizens instead, Martha Nussbaum and Paul Muldoon examine the importance of classic tragedies in promoting compassion by revealing the vulnerable subjects. Both scholars study *Philoctetes* by Sophocles, connecting compassion (among other emotions) to both Western constitutionalism and cosmopolitanism.

For Nussbaum, compassion involves both a judgement of non-desert, a eudemonistic judgement (including non-human animals), and to overcome its partiality, education is crucial and tragedies its best tool. While Muldoon interprets Greek tragedy in its old context, showing that sharing the suffering might distort political judgement, because pain creates an unconditional obligation and blindness towards the suppliant, and against the claims of the political world. The abandoned *Philoctetes* became a revengeful speechless beast in his encounter of the compassionate Neoptolemus, and the "Machiavellian" *Odysseus* (whose goal was to save the polity). Pain, in the classical world, was the opposite to politics, because it is incommunicable through speech, disabling human reason. For a Greek audience, Neoptolemus' compassion was a threat to their country, becoming paralyzed (*aporia*) within his intimate-private realm, while *Odysseus*' lack of compassion showed justice towards his political community's interest. Yet the problem of mobilizing the victimized citizens' cosmopolitan compassion towards the alien victims remains, leaving the second as passive victims, as apolitical animals, which feminist and postcolonial politics denounce. It is important to define politics in a cosmopolitan postcolonial way, once the domestic politics has become globalized affecting the whole planet; this is a challenge for most chapters of this otherwise essential book. Current citizen science, with its glocal knowledge (including theater plays), provide some solutions.

The responsible citizens and the active victims

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In 2016 Wajdi Mouawad rewrote *Philoctetes* in “The inflammation of the verb to live” (2016), showing a defeated Greece by the Troika, inhabited by the most vulnerable (including dogs and suicidal futureless young people). For this, Mouawad (2017) reverses the classical meaning of politics: instead of delivering a political speech, he barks, and his plays, based on local experiences, are situated on the threshold of the states. At the core of his international political discourse lays the responsibility of his main characters who are both wrongdoers and active victims (Mouawad, 2009). Mouawad shows the relevance of compassion for the agency of the victims, essential for acting efficiently regarding international problems, such as forced migrations. While NGOs need to promote civic compassion towards migrants (#RefugeesWelcome), the postcolonial and feminist conception of politics ask the citizens about their responsibility and the migration’s causes (#NotinmyName). Promoting both politics of compassion is essential, combining global humanitarian paternalistic actions with listening to the vulnerable to act following their interests, and assuming the citizens’ responsibility in their tragedy. This way of conceiving politics is made of compassionate, vulnerable, co-dependent and eco-dependent active subjects, which seems at odds with the dominant liberal conception of politics in the book, because while it is efficient regarding historic injustices and violent conflicts, it also puts political liberal domestic systems at risk. But responsible citizens might wonder if, as current safe observers, they are willing to pay the price of stability in exchange for enslaving millions of peoples and destroying the whole planet. Perhaps, as some chapters emphasize, the politics of compassion is worth the risk. Despite its dominant Western approach, this is an indispensable and groundbreaking transdisciplinary book for rethinking current international political challenges.

About the author:

Eva Botella-Ordinas is professor of the Early Modern History Department at the Autonomous University of Madrid (UAM) and member of the University Institute DEMOSPAZ and of the UNESCO Chair on Education for Social Justice. She has been member or Senior Researcher of 11 national and international funded research projects (currently leading the project: POSTORYA). She has published more than 20 international peer-reviewed indexed publications and has been officially recognized for 18 years of intensive research.