

# Empathy and power

## Unraveling the political fabric of an emotion

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**Abstract:** Emotions have been perceived as an object of philosophical and ethical inquiry since Greco-Roman times, but the outburst of “affect theory” transformed their theoretical vision by identifying them as cultural practices subjected to dynamics of power. Even if the critique has pointed at the political dangers that affects like compassion may imply, empathy, which is having a moment of popularity in multiple disciplines, is still being analyzed as a highly democratizing emotion. In addition, its imaginative process is generally simplified and the narrow focus that limits its occurrence is overlooked. This article aims to identify the power dictates that determine empathy theoretically as well as in its practice, putting the focus on the moral barriers that dictate who is worthy of being understood, and proposing literature as a way to expand our empathic capacity.

**Keywords:** politics, affect theory, empathy, morality, extreme empathy.

### **Empatia i poder. Desentranyant el teixit polític d'una emoció**

**Resum:** Si bé les emocions s'han percebut com a objecte d'interrogació filosòfica i ètica des de l'antiguitat grecoromana, l'aparició de la «teoria dels afectes» va transformar-ne la visió teòrica en assenyalar-les com a pràctiques culturals sotmeses a les dinàmiques del poder. La crítica cultural s'ha encarregat d'identificar els perills polítics d'afectes com ara l'empatia, que viu un moment de gran popularitat a escala transdisciplinària, i però que encara s'analitza com una emoció democratitzadora —cosa que duu a simplificar-la com a procés imaginatiu— i s'obvia el focus que en limitaria l'abast. Aquest article pretén identificar els dictats del poder que determinen l'empatia tant teòricament com pràcticament, centrant-se en les barreres morals que dictaminen qui és digne de ser objecte de comprensió i proposant la literatura com a via d'expansió de la capacitat empàtica.

**Paraules clau:** política, teoria dels afectes, empatia, moralitat, empatia extrema.

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## 1. A brief chronology of the liaison between power and emotion

Ever since Plato, in one of his dialogical exercises with Socrates, *Phaedrus*, conceived the well-known image of the human mind as a chariot dominated by the confronted forces of two horses, Reason and Passion, emotions have occupied a paramount and controversial space in Western philosophy's attempts to theorize social activities such as politics and ethics. Anticipating the need of developing an adequate cartography of the emotions to advance a political and moral theory, philosophers like the Scottish sentimentalists David Hume and Adam Smith or the previous rationalist Baruch Spinoza devoted part of their thought to, as the latter wrote, "define the nature and strength of the emotions" (1957: 24) and their influence in human relations. However, affect has not been considered in its fully political dimension until the 20th century,<sup>1</sup> when poststructuralist thinkers—especially Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari—located affect amid every possible relation between a body and the surrounding world (Deleuze, 1992), to the point of considering that there is no position above emotions from which to approach politics (Bertelsen; Murphie, 2010). The capital relevance given to affect in political theory, as well as the progressive undermining of the long-standing Platonian opposition Reason vs. Passion, became a site of consensus by the end of the last century, when the work of philosophers and cultural critics like Eve Sedgwick and Brian Massumi started a trend of interest in the emotions which has developed into an area of study in itself: affect theory. Since then, whether they have catalogued their critical analysis under this umbrella term or not, many thinkers have adopted this interdisciplinary focus on emotionality to tackle political matters as diverse as the effect of the capitalist system (Hardt; Negri, 2004; Berlant, 2011), the site of feminism and queer activism in micropolitics (Ahmed, 2010), the complexity of transnationalism (Pedwell, 2014), or the geopolitical and racial delimitations of affect (Thrift, 2010). With all, in the last two decades, the pairing "affect and politics" has been identified as a dialogical, two-sided binomial: emotions do impinge on the practice of macro- and

micropolitics, and political and moral considerations have a major role in the definition of emotions, which not only are no longer perceived as antonymous to reason but are even considered by a section of the affect theorists as direct results of judgement (Nussbaum, 2001). Even if publications such as Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* (2011) have impressively displayed how all affects, including the most innocent-looking ones, such as hope or—with reference to Ahmed's work (2004, 2010)—happiness, are profoundly invested in the interests of the power structures that determine us as individuals, I consider that some affective experiences, by their inherent dynamics, put systematically at work hierarchies of power that, although having been denounced by the critique, usually remain unnoticed in our imaginary and in our daily exchanges. Therefore, in this article, I propose to briefly approach the way in which, historically, privilege and power have forged the very definition and, consequently, the paradigmatic experience of one complex—and yet very trendy—affection: empathy.

## 2. Empathy, sympathy and compassion

It is generally agreed nowadays that emotions constitute political and cultural practices that, as such, "reproduce cultural distinctions, social norms and political practices of exclusion" (Pedwell, 2014: 2). What we have learned to be afraid of, whom we identify with, what touches, bores or disgusts us, and even our attempts to problematize and escape these inherited emotional patterns, are aligned with a Euro-American mentality. However, amongst this diagnosis of how the established system precedes and determines what we had always perceived as "natural" inclinations (Hume, 2007; Spinoza, 1957), certain voices inside affect theory have focused on a group of emotions that seem particularly prone to reproduce hierarchies of power: compassion, sympathy, and empathy. But why classify these three expressions of affect in a group distinct from the rest? The field of cognitive approaches to cultural studies has selected the term "emotional response" (Eisenberg, 2005; Keen, 2007; Carroll, 2011) to refer to the idea that, while most emotions "contain an ineliminable reference to *me*" (Nussbaum, 2001: 52), compassion, sympathy and empathy must be excluded from this description, as they necessarily appear as a reaction to the state of at least one another. Therefore, they are conceived as "other-oriented" emotions (Coplan, 2011: xxxiv). Nonetheless, this is too innocent a label, as practically every feeling, for instance happiness, can eventually flourish as a reac-

<sup>1</sup> Despite the semantic difference between affect and emotion—by which "affect" assumes a third-person perspective, designating a "feeling described from the observer's perspective" (Ngai, 2005: 25) and "emotion" constitutes a feeling that "belongs" to a first-person—both concepts will be used indistinctly in this article. This terminological decision responds to the desire of addressing the reader as both observer and subject of feelings.

tion to something or someone. Taking this into account, and with the purpose of remarking why these three affects may be more dangerous under the lens of power exchanges, I suggest here a division of sentiments in the categories of transitive and intransitive. I borrow the distinction from the field of syntax to remit to the idea that, just like verbs, some emotions, such as sadness or boredom, can be transitive or intransitive, while others, like jealousy or pity, require an object to occur. Thus, you can feel happy without identifying a particular reason, and, from then on, through an inside-out process, perceive what surrounds you as equally cheerful. On the contrary, you cannot feel empathic in an immanent way and without being conscious of its origin: you need an external income to give place to an empathic outcome. The common transitive quality of sympathy, empathy or compassion turns them into particularly political emotions at the point where, unlike other transitive emotions, like repugnance, the compulsory external object that they imply is commonly another person, which turns them into intersubjective exchanges of affect and, by extension, of power.

This openness to the other that they entail, the same faculty that historically gave these emotions the praiseworthy status of philanthropic approaches to society, universal to the human condition, and even a pre-requisite for sane ontology (Darwall, 1998: 262), has now put them in the spotlight of suspicion. In this sense, affect theory critics were rapid in deconstructing the “ethics of privilege” (Berlant, 2004: 1) involved in the practice of compassion and its superlative form, pity. The publication of the monographic edited by Lauren Berlant (2004) was determinant in perceiving that a sentiment largely seen as pious and humanitarian often results in an “emotionally gratifying condescension”, as the “pain of someone else provides an access of pleasure for the compassionate one” (Garber, 2004: 20). During the critical moment of the War on Terror and the military conflicts in Afghanistan and the Middle East, in which westerners were often moved by images and information about the warfare, it seemed urgent to denounce the vertical hierarchy that compassion may imply: a criticism that was also extended to the practice of sympathy, which was equally portrayed as a riskily unilateral and politically sterile emotion in essential works of Sontag (2003) or Butler (2006).<sup>2</sup> Strangely, while compassion

and sympathy were subdued to this process of revision, empathy, a complex transitive emotion, remained mostly untouched and, in fact, increased its popularity as a potentially democratic ideal. Then, as Pedwell proclaimed, “where compassion quickly tripped in the direction of inequality, charity or patronage”, the emotion that concerns us, empathy, “remained [...] a condition of equality affinity”, up to the point where, still nowadays, “a person who displays empathy is, it appears, to be congratulated for having fine feelings” (2014: 24). Nevertheless, as I would like to show in this article, an approximation to the politics of empathy may reveal it as being more subtle but more dangerous in its exercises of power.

### 3. Empathy in politics

As has been previously outlined, since the outburst of scholars’ focus on affect, and because of the discovery of mirror neurons in 1996,<sup>3</sup> empathy has aroused much interest not only as an object of research in the academic world, but also as a discursive tool in the field of politics. A great proof of how the so-called “empathic turn” (Pedwell, 2014: 61) inside affect theory reached the arena of politics and business is the centrality that this emotional engagement had in the oratory of the former president of the United States, Barack Obama. Already in 2006, Obama diagnosed his country with the disease of “empathy deficit” (2006: 67). Since then, and until his farewell speech in 2017, in which he begged his countrymen to “heed the advice” of Harper Lee’s character Atticus Finch and make an effort to understand others by “climbing into their skin”, Obama promoted empathy and invested in this affect to renew American exceptionalism and to link his term of office with a sense of hope and change. Only, his voice was not the only one to mobilize empathic comprehension, and the uses that he and others gave to empathy in public speeches clearly exemplify its multi-faced nature. As Paul Bloom (2015) pointed, “the dark side of empathy” is unveiled when we notice that Obama used the same claim for understanding when he was trying to justify airstrikes on Syria as an act of empathy for ISIS victims, or when his Republican adversary, Donald Trump, recurrently asked for empathy for the victims of murders and rapes committed by

<sup>2</sup> See also Baudrillard (1991) as one of Butler’s and Sontag’s antecedents on dealing with the Occident’s biased treatment and reception of external warfare.

<sup>3</sup> Mirror neurons are neurons that are activated when a human being acts, but also when they observe the same action performed by another. Their discovery in 1996 by the scientific group of G. Rizzolatti gave empathy a scientific basis.

undocumented South American immigrants. These discursive twists demonstrate that empathy has a narrow focus, and can distort our moral judgement (Bloom, 2016: 31). There is empathy in politics, but also politics in empathy, and this is so to the extreme that even its more neutral definition, its paradigmatic theorization and its usual practices are embedded in power structures.

#### 4. Politics in empathy

If there is one aspect in which the scholars preoccupied with the subject of empathy agree upon, is the intricacy to provide it with a single categorization (Coplan, 2011; Kaplan, 2011; Levin *et al.*, 2016). In spite of the general opinion that the deep comprehension that empathy entails is difficult to achieve, it is paradoxical that all works that open by announcing its complication end up coming with a clear definition. For instance, Coplan (2011: 5) delineates the emotion as “a complex imaginative process in which an observer simulates another person’s situated psychological states, both cognitive and affective, while maintaining clear self-other differentiation”. Under this psychological-oriented definition, it is usually highlighted that what makes empathy such a profound emotion is the fact that the imaginative project that the empathizer must carry through has to be supported by an affinity with the target of empathy, ideally accompanied with a characterization including “facts about the target’s character, emotions, moods, dispositional tendencies, and life experience” that will serve as a background for empathy to happen (Coplan, 2004: 146). These strict requirements remit to the idea that empathy gives preference to people “that we find attractive or who seem similar to us” (Bloom, 2016: 2) or that, as Adam Smith already wrote in the 18th century, “we expect less sympathy from a common acquaintance than from a friend” (2004: 63).<sup>4</sup> Although it may seem contradictory, this popular vision of empathy facilitates its practice: despite its stated obstacles, under this perspective, empathy is portrayed as a benevolent, attainable, and cathartic emotion. Hence, empathy has been simplified, in the name of its supposed complexity, to an affective process of short social scope

<sup>4</sup> The term “empathy”, a derivation of the Greek *empathia*, was not introduced in English until 1909, when it appeared as a translation of the aesthetic idea of *Einfühlung* in German. Up until then, in the works of David Hume and Adam Smith for instance, the idea of “sympathy” was used to refer to that which nowadays we understand as empathy (see Coplan, 2011: xii).

that is difficult to establish with people that are outside our close circle or diverge from our ideology, race or class. In other words, if you are a Western subject, it will be probably easier for you to empathize with Trump’s victims of murder and Obama’s sufferers that with their corresponding perpetrators or even with the geographically and culturally distant civilians of militarized Syria. As Pedwell explains, the result of this mild idea of empathy is that the importance given to proximity and face-to-face encounters often elides the way in which empathy is “implicated in, and productive of, power” (2014: 185). Being “multiple, ambivalent and transitory at the same time as it is powerful, political and structural” (184), the ways in which the circuits of this emotion reproduce power inequalities are equally diverse. Without wishing to detract from the interest of observing how the “narrow focus” of empathy is gendered (101) or how it may support prejudices such as racism or xenophobia, implications that have been hinted at here and commented at length elsewhere (Ahmed, 2004; Thrift, 2010), I would like to focus briefly on an inequitable aspect of empathic practice that has perhaps been less commented on, namely how the dominant morality and “common sense”, intimately linked to hegemonic power, delimit who is worthy of being the target of this affection.

#### 5. Extreme empathy

One latent principle that makes empathy reluctant to “challenge identity-based divisions” (Massumi, 2015: 41) is the implicit idea that, in the common understanding of empathy that has been previously explained, it is an emotional response that the empathizer is willing to have, and the target *deserves*. This vertical scheme, by which the target of empathy must reunite some merits to be understood, corresponds to the canonical idea of empathy that Susan Keen calls “mainstream empathy” (2007: 4). As Adam Morton notices, some constraints that limit empathic capacity are due, on many occasions, to an “internalized code of behavior” (2011: 318) that morally restricts our imagination when it comes to humanizing others. By the assumption that only some are worthy of being empathized with, empathy, an emotion that should in principle make the empathizer widen their epistemology to embrace that of the other, is turned into a comfortable self-assertion of the empathizer’s values. To face the concept of “mainstream empathy” (Keen, 2007) and acknowledge that this emotional reaction is “inherently multiple” (Pedwell, 2014: 190) and must challenge our assumptions, Pedwell purposes the la-

bel of “alternative empathies” to refer to these “forms of affective engagement that invite us to break from fixed patterns and positions and establish different solidarities” (36) with those subjectivities that are distanced from our comfort zone, as is the case with the perpetrators in Trump and Obama’s discourses. Returning once again to this reference, the trouble in that case is not only the great challenge that comprehending their deeds poses, but also that it seems morally reprehensible to do so. This is so because, amongst those who have been traditionally excluded from the “spotlight” of empathy (Bloom, 2015) we must include “people who do evil”, whom we are “prone to dehumanize” (Bloom, 2016: 181) because of the moral principles that have delineated the limits of our subjectivity and our affective capacity. Hence, empathy for subjects committing immoral actions, or what has also been called “negative empathy” (Lipps, 1906; Ercolino, 2018), is one paradigmatic example of these “alternative empathies” that may contradict cultural restrictions and extend our affective and epistemological horizons.

Despite the transgression that this emotion poses, since its first formulation in the 19th century, “negative empathy has received little attention by scholars” (Ercolino, 2018: 244); a critical gap that, I argue, has not been covered at all by researchers in the field of the recent affective turn or its consequent “empathic turn”. As far as I know, only two scholars have directly dealt with negative empathy in the last two decades: Morton Ercolino, who wrote two corresponding articles on the issue; other than these brief investigations, Keen (2007) does mention the possibility of co-feeling with antagonistic figures, but without employing the term “negative empathy” or delving deeper into the concept. The term itself, “negative empathy”, originally coined by the German philosopher Theodor Lipps (Ercolino, 2018: 245) in the 19th century, was initially defined as “empathy for others’ negative emotions” (Morelli; Rameson; Lieberman, qtd. in Ercolino, 2018: 244). Nevertheless, considering that the label “negative emotions” encompasses emotional states such as sadness or distress, which are usually also the object of “mainstream empathy”, contemporary revisions of the concept have re-defined negative empathy as “empathy with those who perform atrocious acts” (Morton, 2011: 318). Looking for a brief term, and one escaping the binary opposition positive/negative, I would purpose “counter-moral empathy”, to stress the transgressive potential of this emotion, or even “extreme empathy”. a nomenclature that remits to a gradation of the empathic approach by which the effort in understanding, and the threat that this un-

derstanding poses in the empathizer’s vision of the world, determine the level of depth in empathy. The latter terminology points precisely at the conception of empathy advocated in this article: an affective effort that broadens the subject and seeks to understand the other beyond hierarchies and imposed power barriers. To try to comprehend criminals is to go beyond the limits of generalized power, what Foucault (1994: 135) named the “Bourgeois Order”, in which the first punishment given to the “abnormal”, their first exclusion from society, is to dispossess them of their right to speak and account for themselves (Morey, 2014: 302).

However, it is undeniable that the so-called “mainstream empathy” captures a material reality, as, in our everyday life, we often have more opportunities to engage with our proximate ones, or at least with moral people, than with those apparently unworthy of being targets of our empathy. As Pedwell observes, this type of “affects at the margins” (2014: 95) can in fact be experienced outside the physical meeting, as they more easily arise via forms of representation such as literature, which “can activate ways of thinking and feeling empathy that may not be possible, or easily discernible, through the embodied face-to-face encounter alone” (Pedwell, 2014: 4).

## 6. Empathy and literature

Indeed, in the case of what I have referred to as “extreme empathy”, it is an agreed-on assumption amongst the reduced bibliography that this kind of alternative empathy is more likely to emerge in the realm of the fictional. Thus, as Ngai notes, “literature may in fact be the ideal space to investigate ugly feelings” (2005: 2), as it “provides safe spaces within which to see through the eyes of the psychopath, to occupy the subject position of the oppressive racist or to share the brutalizing past of the condemned outcast” (Keen, 2007: 131). This line of argument puts forward the idea that literature would not only be better at offering encounters with a more varied range of subjectivities than real-life experiences, in which our access to and knowledge of this kind of individuals is very limited, but would also constitute a “safe space” where the “moral barriers” (Morton) that prevent us from empathizing with them could be broken down, giving space to “a potentially regressive aesthetic experience, consisting in [...] identification with negative characters” (Ercolino, 2018: 244). Taking into account the intimate connection between literature and evil (Bataille, 1957), multiple works offer the op-



portunity to delve into the micro-cosmos of immoral subjects, from universal classics, such as *Crime and Punishment*, to contemporary best-sellers, like *Les bi-ennveillantes* by Jonathan Littell or *L'adversaire* by Emmanuel Carrère; including modern classics (*In Cold Blood*, by Truman Capote), lesser-known publications (*The Butcher Boy*, P. McCabe, 1994), and playwrights (*The Events*, D. Greig, 2013).

In sum, literature produces “possible worlds” (Eco, 1984; Doležel, 1988) that open the chance of establishing “parasocial” relations (Oatley, 2016) and empathizing with fictional subjectivities to which we rarely have access in our day-to-day encounters. Hence, narrative, and other art representations may be key in overcoming the politically biased practice of empathy, which is, as all emotions are to a greater or lesser extent, “radically shaped by historical relations of power” (Pedwell, 2014: 30). To identify the dark spaces that the socializing spotlight of affection has left unilluminated, and to fill them with light through alternative emotional practices it is essential to leave behind the assumptions of power that silently govern and inhibit our affectivity. That is a critical exercise in which philosophy and literature can help a great deal, as, despite their diverse methodologies, both seek to make the human soul legible in its multiple occurrences. Empathy, then, should be found at the heart of both practices. As writer John Steinbeck noted in a journal entry in 1938: “There is writing promoting social change, writing punishing injustice, writing in celebration of heroism, but always that base theme: try to understand each other. [...] Knowing a man well never leads to hate and nearly always leads to love” (Shillinglaw, 1994: 8).

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