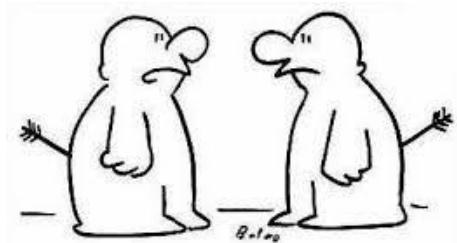# Radical Empathy: Politics and Emotion

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"I know exactly how you feel."

'Radical Empathy: Politics and Emotion' (this text is the basis for a talk I gave at Roehampton on 9th November 2016, the day of the election of Donald Trump as US President)

by Nina Power

Thank you for coming. What I want to talk about today is part of a projected bigger project (or at least a medium-sized project) that concerns the role of emotion in political and theoretical life. The idea of 'radical' empathy stems from the idea of trying to grasp the problem by its root (as in radical feminism's emphasis on male violence and patriarchy as root explanatory tools). This interest in empathy was partly stimulated by reflections on political organising, in particular the idea of getting people to 'care' about the suffering of others in a direct political sense, and here I'm thinking in particularly about campaigning around deaths in custody where, despite the obvious injustice involved in instances where families and friends have lost loved ones – often people of colour – at the hands of the state, and time and time again receive no recognition of any kind that this has happened – no apology, no compensation, no prosecution of the state agents involved, or in the rare cases where there have been prosecutions, no guilty verdict in the courts.

One thing that strikes me in these cases – something that both those on the left and the right should in principle want to see accountability for, whether out of a sense of justice and fairness, and support for the families and those killed, or because the state to be strong must be prepare to deal with its own mistakes (and in this respect although deaths at the hands of the state is usually seen as a 'left' issue, it should not be surprising that as Home Secretary Theresa May was very outspoken on the topic, and set up an independent review into them, stating: 'But when such incidents do occur, they are a tragedy that has the potential to undermine the relationship between the public and the police'[**1**]) – is the general lack of outrage when these deaths happen (INQUEST, one of the main bodies that works on the topic, reports that there have been over 4500 deaths in custody since 1990 (custody here means prisons, secure training centres, in police custody, immigration detention centres and psychiatric detention and those deaths involving contact with state agents)). Noting that 'There has not been a successful homicide prosecution for a death in custody for over 30 years'[**2**] I am curious to know why more people do not feel moved by the plight of these families where the state's capacity to kill is blatantly exhibited. One can imagine right-wing thoughts on the matter ('they were probably doing something wrong anyway', 'it only happens rarely' and, implicitly, the message, 'well they were poor/and or black so who cares'), but

what I am here more interested in is the response that uses the *inability to empathise* as the basis for a lack of engagement – e.g. in situations where families are asking *everyone* to join a ceremonial march to remember the lives of those killed and to demand enquiries into their deaths, where the response is something like 'well, I can't imagine how these families feel; out of respect, I don't feel like I can attend'.

We might regard this claim as superficial and hypocritical reasoning, but it points to something quite important: the limits to empathy as a politically coercive strategy. Read alongside recent reports that African-Americans are routinely undertreated for pain by white physicians, on the basis of 'fantastical' beliefs that black people have 'thicker skin' and 'less sensitive nerve endings',**[3]** as well as the recent discourse and treatment around refugees, particularly concerning the relationship between age, 'innocence' and 'deserve' (see David Davies grotesque calls for teeth-checking) – there was a brief *sentimental* response to the photo of Alan Kurdi, the Syrian refugee whose body washed up on a Turkish beach in September 2015, but this arguably did not translate into any larger or practical structures of empathy that might have seen widespread protests in favour of giving sanctuary to refugees and so on.

My interest also partly stems from a disciplinary concern, which I think has strong implications for politics: philosophy's own relation to emotion and to empathy in particular. In another piece I recently wrote for the collection: 'AFTER THE "SPECULATIVE TURN": Realism, Philosophy, and Feminism' entitled 'Philosophy, Sexism, Emotion, Rationalism' I argued that 'what usually gets sidelined and undermined as "emotion," and is frequently gendered as feminine or female, is also itself a rationalism, and that emotion and reason are in fact not mortal enemies, but rather inseparable branches of the collective experience of social and political life that Philosophy purports to address' and that, furthermore, I asked: 'What would a rationalism stripped of its masculinist history look like? I want to claim that this rationalism must also be an emotionalism, that is to say, a neglect of the rational basis for anger, misery, hatred, love, care, and so on will likely end up reinstating old oppositions and with them, gendered presuppositions about where thought "belongs." Spinoza in the Ethics already teaches us this. And this understanding, above all, a social question, a practical question. As Ericka Tucker puts it in "Spinoza's Social Sage": "Few, if any, communities are organized through reason alone. Affects and the imagination are the primary modes through which humans interact and join their power." Gender is the violence done to both reason and emotion by virtue of separating the two along sexed lines.' I suggested that 'Philosophy need not be the victim of this.'**[4]**

Today I will partly put to one side the question of gender and emotion and also the disciplinary question of the relationship between emotion and reason in Philosophy or in the constitution of disciplines as such (though these are very important questions). What I want to briefly outline are two potential criticisms of any centring of empathy in politics, before looking at a recent, topical discussion of the role of empathy in the US election, and here I will briefly discuss the controversy surrounding respected and important sociologist Arlie Rusell Hochschild's (whose work on 'emotional labour' in *The Managed Heart* from 1983 revolutionised feminist, Marxist sociological understandings of work and exploitation).

The Limits of Empathy

In Saidya V. Hartman's 1997 *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, Hartman begins by making a powerful argument against the way in which the spectacle of violence against slaves, and she references Frederick Douglass's account of the beating of his Aunt Hester deliberately without repeating the description: 'in order,' she puts it 'to call attention to the ease with which such scenes are usually reiterated, the casualness with which they are circulated, and the consequences of this routine display of the slave's ravaged body'. Rather than 'inciting indignation', she suggests often they 'immure us to pain by virtue of their familiarity', and reinforce the 'spectacular character of black suffering' (we can think too of the videos of the on-camera deaths of Eric Garner, Tamir Rice and many other people – largely black children and men – killed by police that circulated over the past few years). Hartman wonders about the line between witnessing and voyeurism (or between witness and spectator) and wonders if the pain of the other 'merely provide[s] us with the opportunity for self-reflection?' What is at issue for Hartman is what she calls the 'precariousness of empathy'. How precisely, she puts it:

[D]oes one give expression to these outrages without exacerbating the indifference to suffering that is the consequence of the benumbing spectacle or contend with the narcissistic identification that obliterates the other or the prurience that too often is the response to such displays?'

There is very much more to say about Hartman's claims and the book as a whole, but for the time being It is interesting to note how exactly Black Lives Matter and other campaigns around the extra-judicial police and state killings of mainly black, mainly men has dealt with this question of being a 'witness' rather than a 'voyeur' – think of the slogans 'Hands Up, Don't Shoot', and 'I can't breathe', not to mention the direct action 'die-ins' (a tactic also used in protests during the AIDS crisis) – here one's presence as a black protester is operating as a direct *and* symbolic stand-in for those killed by the state, as opposed to the 'not in my name' slogan of the Iraq War protests and others, more a 'it could be me' position (there is the role of white activists in Black Lives Matter to consider and questions around allyship, being a race traitor, a co-conspirator and so on).

The second critique of empathy I briefly want to raise here comes from a legal perspective. In 1994's *Justice Miscarried: Ethics, Aesthetics and the Law*, Costas Douzinas examines the situation of refugees as bearers of 'otherness' and their treatment in English courts. Here it is the correct performance of emotion (namely a 'well-founded fear of persecution' as asylum law has it) and the judge's 'humanism' that is at stake. As Douzinas puts it:

The tendency of the common law, whether in its pure positivistic manifestations, or even in its softer humanistic guises, is always to reduce the outsider to the insider. The insider, represented by the judge, who himself represents the eternal wisdom of the common law, always knows what the outsider feels because the outsider is only the same as the insider stripped of the sophisticated responses that the insider, the judge, is able to make. The other, as outsider, can always be reduced to the comprehensible insider by being made to conform to the vision the supreme insider, the judge, expects of everyone else. It therefore follows that the standards of the judge are also applicable to the refugee, and if on these criteria the judge feels no need to protect the refugee, then the refugee can be sent back to persecution and probably devastation with a good conscience. The suffering face of the outsider is 'translated' into the reasonable man of the common law and on this basis is found not to be suffering at all, not to be in need of the very protection that the law is supposed to provide for the weak and the disadvantaged. The other becomes self and in the process her destruction is assured.[5]

This complex intertwining of the empathy of the same and the other has important parallels with Hartman's point regarding narcissistic identification (and we must note that an excess of empathy is extremely unhelpful in most situations where someone needs support) at the level of the state (and think about the ideological function of British self-images: reasonable, stiff upper lip, even a certain kind of humour and self-mocking, all of which can be deployed to criticise the 'inappropriate' emotion of the other – a stance which has serious implications in asylum cases, where a possible lack of emotion is read as being 'not how I (read reasonable British citizen) would react to being tortured/raped/exiled/persecuted. The truth is, we do not know how we would feel. Why defend empathy here where formal criteria might be more politically helpful?

The final argument I want to turn to is Hochschild's reading of Trump's 'biggest fans', an article written in October of this year.[6] Here Hochschild suggests, to much criticism, that the left must understand what she calls the 'deep story' of the right:

The deep story of the right goes like this:

You are patiently standing in the middle of a long line stretching toward the horizon, where the American Dream awaits. But as you wait, you see people cutting in line ahead of you. Many of these line-cutters are black—beneficiaries of affirmative action or welfare. Some are career-driven women pushing into jobs they never had before. Then you see immigrants, Mexicans, Somalis, the Syrian refugees yet to come. As you wait in this unmoving line, you're being asked to feel sorry for them all. You have a good heart. But who is deciding who you should feel compassion for? Then you see President Barack Hussein Obama waving the line-cutters forward. He's on their side. In fact, isn't he a line-cutter too? How did this fatherless black guy pay for Harvard? As you wait your turn, Obama is using the money in your pocket to help the line-cutters. He and his liberal backers have removed the shame from taking. The government has become an instrument for redistributing your money to the undeserving. It's not your government anymore; it's theirs.

Hochschild's argument regarding empathy is at least two-fold: empathy (or compassion) is imposes by an elite who appear to help everyone else but you (and many people who do not 'deserve' it), and an implicit cry for empathy on the part of the presumable left-liberal readers of her piece. It partly attempts an explanation of Trump's success among the economically dispossessed white working class, and also an attempt to put a face to their feelings (her piece portrays the struggle of several people in this category very sensitively). She writes:

Trump, the King of Shame, has covertly come to the rescue. He has shamed virtually every line-cutting group in the Deep Story—women, people of color, the disabled, immigrants, refugees. But he's hardly uttered a single bad word about unemployment insurance, food stamps, or Medicaid, or what the tea party calls "big government handouts," for anyone—including blue-collar white men. In this feint, Trump solves a white male problem of pride. Benefits? If you need them, okay. He masculinizes it. You can be "high energy" macho—and yet may need to apply for a government benefit.

Trump's popularity, then, partly depends upon his deliberate or inadvertent (Hochschild is unsure which) providing of a cover-story for feelings of shame, a weaponizing reversal of shame as a new kind of pride. In an interview with Hochschild in an article entitled 'What is this election missing? Empathy for Trump voters' by Colby Itkowitz[7], Hochschild, in response to the question 'So is lack of empathy what is driving us apart?' surprises the interviewer by placing the empathy deficit not on Trump supporters but on 'progressives': 'Progressives have to get out of their corner and reach out; we're stuck in our enclaves, our geographic enclaves, our media enclaves. Extreme blame-pinning rhetoric tends to extinguish empathy toward the 'other' and create fellow-feeling among those with whom one already agrees.' Hochschild concludes by proposing 'an innovative program – through churches, schools, unions, people-to-people "living room conversations" – to get people out of our enclaves and talking to each other across the political divide. The purpose is to restore the democratic tradition of civil discourse across differences that has been broken by this election cycle. It could be called The Restoring Civility Project. Or the National Empathy Wall Project.'

Criticism of the 'empathy for Trump supporters' argument was speedy. In 'Stop telling Us to Empathize with Trump Supporters', Sarah Lerner pointedly notes that this demographic is hardly underrepresented: 'if there's one thing that this election isn't short on, it's articles telling underrepresented groups that we should have compassion for people who support a hateful, racist, and sexist ignoramus'.[8] Lerner points out that many if not most Trump supporters are not working but middle-class (which seems to be borne out by the most recent polling stats today: 'White and wealthy voters gave victory to Donald Trump'[9] – 'Broken down by income bracket, 52% of voters earning less than $50,000 a year – who make up 36% of the electorate – voted for Clinton, and 41% for Trump. But among the 64% of American voters who earn more than $50,000 a year, 49% chose Trump, and 47% Clinton.'), that racism and xenophobia are much larger motivating forces than economic anxiety and that research shows that hateful attitudes toward women are a strong predictor of Trump support. She writes: 'Three political scientists who studied the connection between sexism, emotions, and support for Trump found that the more hostile voters were toward women, the more likely they were to support Trump.' This is less about those who support so-called 'traditional roles' for women, and more about those who actively believe that feminist gains need to be reversed.

In another recent article entitled 'Yes, Donald Trump Is A Master Of Empathy', biologist Emily Willingham argues that

The empathy gap isn't between progressives and Trump supporters. After all, many baffled and wary conservatives have also disavowed Trump, leading to a notorious split within his own party. In fact, it's not a gap in perspective-taking or shared feeling between opponents at all. It's a gap in empathetic abilities between Trump and his own followers. The Trump supporter in Western Pennsylvania sees Trump exactly the way he wants her to see him. That's because Trump himself shows some brilliance in applying a certain kind of empathy, a talent his most ardent true believers seem to lack.

Willingham makes a sharp divide between different forms of empathy. On the one hand, there is cognitive empathy: 'our ability to understand someone else's emotions by reading their cues–vocal changes, facial expressions, body language–and accurately interpret the feelings they express.' Willingham suggests that 'When we exercise cognitive empathy, we are doing perspective-taking: putting ourselves in the other person's shoes and seeing they way they see. Having this ability doesn't automatically make you a fully empathetic human being. Some people can abuse their talent for this form of empathy, precisely interpreting another person's emotional state and then exploiting it for their own gain.' This, she suggests is what Trump is able to do ('Trump supporters get a full dose of cognitive empathy directed straight at them').

Opposing this kind of empathy to affective empathy ('feeling compassion for or even sharing another's emotion. It's a kind of helpless contagion of emotion sharing, as opposed to the more cerebral process of detecting that an emotion is present'), Willingham suggests that Trump has been able to manipulate cognitive empathy (the feeling that Trump speaks for people, or thinks like they do) under the guise of affective empathy – while absolutely burying real affective

empathy for those groups that Trump demonises. There is no doubt that untangling empathy will be crucial in the months and years ahead. Empathy, and radical empathy – getting to its roots – is a political issue that is both dangerous and necessary.

[1] https://www.gov.uk/government/news/home-secretary-announces-chair-for-deaths-in-custody-review (https://www.gov.uk/government/news/home-secretary-announces-chair-for-deaths-in-custody-review)

[2] http://www.inquest.org.uk/issues/home (http://www.inquest.org.uk/issues/home)

[3] https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/to-your-health/wp/2016/04/04/do-blacks-feel-less-pain-than-whites-their-doctors-may-think-so/ (https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/to-your-health/wp/2016/04/04/do-blacks-feel-less-pain-than-whites-their-doctors-may-think-so/)

[4] 'Philosophy, Sexism, Emotion, Rationalism' in 'AFTER THE "SPECULATIVE TURN": Realism, Philosophy, and Feminism' edited by Katerina Kolozova and Eileen A. Joy (Punctum Books, 2016).

[5] *Justice Miscarried: Ethics, Aesthetics and the Law*

[6] http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/08/trump-white-blue-collar-supporters (http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/08/trump-white-blue-collar-supporters)

[7] https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/inspired-life/wp/2016/11/02/what-is-this-election-missing-empathy-for-trump-voters/ (https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/inspired-life/wp/2016/11/02/what-is-this-election-missing-empathy-for-trump-voters/)

[8] https://medium.com/@sarahlerner/stop-telling-us-to-empathize-with-trump-supporters-597d21756d54#.7v52gwhp2 (https://medium.com/@sarahlerner/stop-telling-us-to-empathize-with-trump-supporters-597d21756d54#.7v52gwhp2)

[9] https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/nov/09/white-voters-victory-donald-trump-exit-polls (https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/nov/09/white-voters-victory-donald-trump-exit-polls)

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