Empathy Imperiled: Capitalism, Culture and the Brain

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Long before beginning work on his recent book, Gary Olson first explored empathy in his classroom at a small liberal arts college. He writes that he found empathy a “pedagogical challenge” and details his efforts to “wake his students from moral amnesia” (p. 16). Indeed, Olson describes bold and courageous events in his political science classroom. Most remarkable and telling of Olson’s own politics is one session he titles “The Execution Class” in a semester-long course on international development and the politics of global inequity. He depicts a small classroom where a set of fairly privileged undergraduates, after learning the intimate details of global poverty, express their wish to “have nice things” and their accompanying desire to ignore the global realities about how and where such “nice things” are made. In an ardent attempt to enlighten the group on personal responsibility and political morality, the author describes a tension-filled follow-up classroom session in which he offers a starter pistol to many of his students and waits for them to aim and shoot at a student playing the part of an activist condemned to death for opposing apartheid.

This lesson in compassion and the reality of the global political condition inspires Olson’s further journey to draw deeper connections between politics and empathy in his new book. Neuroscientists and psychologists have long been studying how behavior can be shaped by culture, but their work does not often enter the realms of “the political.” Olson’s efforts are to bring empathy to the forefront by asking “neuropolitical questions” such as how capitalism changes our brain chemistry, the level of compassion evident in contemporary culture, and most importantly, how we can move toward a more empathetic global politics.

The author defines empathy not only as the ability to identify with another’s situation and perspective, but as a natural and distinctly human moral emotion that necessitates political response. Olson is convinced on the basis of recent neuroscientific discoveries, in particular Marco Iacoboni’s work on the brain’s mirror-neuron system, that human development requires us “to interact with each other in emotionally fulfilling ways” (p. 1). Human beings, Olson concludes, have been hard-wired for empathy by an evolutionary process that has selected mutual concern for the common purpose over self-interested individualism. For Olson, this human necessity is lost under contemporary neoliberalism, and he reiterates what has been understood in much social science research for a long time: capitalism subverts and interferes with what is human, or, in Olson’s terms, removes the very notion of an innate capacity for empathy and compassion. Indeed, in each chapter, he problematizes the authenticity of everyday behavior, demonstrating how cultural tasks become automatic, and consistently cause us to
suppress some emotions and encourage others. Life experiences, he argues, shape our tendencies toward our empathetic behavior and we remain prey to cultural pre-programming that interferes with our biological predisposition toward empathetic acts. This “empathy-deficit disorder” informs our political situation and is supported by our contemporary culture, which, Olson demonstrates, not only requires that we turn off our natural human compassion, but, as it reinforces other ways of interacting, also removes our biological ability to be empathetic in the first place.

Interestingly, individual empathetic action and behavior is not the point of Olson’s argument. Rather, he continually points to global action, especially in his detailed critiques of ongoing empathy research that does not include the relationship between capitalism and human development. He writes that as long as we see global empathy as individual action, empathy will remain episodic and outlying. His nuanced argument most clearly extends to militarism and masculinity in Chapter 8 and media and imagery in Chapter 9, where empathy is channeled at “safe” outlets for capitalism, such as human-interest stories, but not at the larger possibility for political action and permanent change. Indeed, Olson urges us toward a real understanding of human nature through what he terms “dangerous empathy,” and brings a number of contemporary political issues to the forefront. Drawing on a wide array of political sources, from Martin Luther King Jr.’s “radical altruism” to Antonio Gramsci’s work on culture, the book also provides specific examples on how our empathetic capacity can be desensitized through, for example, state-based violence.

Each individual chapter could serve nicely as a course reading in undergraduate politics courses, especially Chapter 3, “Mirror-Neurons, Evolution, and Eco-Empathy,” which concisely describes the neuroscientific research that is Olson’s focus, as well as his definitions of empathy and our evolutionary development as empathetic beings. He narrows in here on biological misinterpretations of humans as selfish beings instead of empathetic ones, and the nature of the political as a moral and ethical imperative. Altruistic acts, he writes, activate a very primitive part of the brain. Proponents of corporate social responsibility would do well to look at Olson’s interpretations of “the empathy-denying imperatives of capitalism itself” (p. 26), a social context that results in a world where we are limited in our compassionate behavior as “it becomes increasingly difficult to get in touch with our moral faculties” (p. 27). Olson argues, however, that we can consciously improve this situation by acting politically in empathetic ways.

Though Olson points to studies on how social and economic class privilege specifically remove empathetic ability (p. 17), missing from the text is a full explanation of how gendered and racialized forms of capitalism have made some of us more empathetic than others, as well as how assumptions about human emotion have been imbedded in the methods of Western science themselves. Indeed, many of Olson’s conclusions are what feminists have argued for a long time: that emotional and bodily ways of knowing are as important as “scientific” knowing and that what is personal is indeed political. Stronger and clearer definitions of “culture” and “science” would inform his critique of contemporary neoliberalism, and for all of Olson’s clarity on how human beings are hardwired for empathy, it remains unclear how particular individuals develop differing degrees of empathy through differing life experiences. Still, his concrete examples
on how we can achieve global political empathy demonstrate that the possibilities for what we can harness as human beings are infinitely more complex than we usually allow in political science.

For a short text in the publisher’s series of “briefs” in political science, the book provides rich material that is worth revisiting and sophisticating. Olson’s work serves as a nice and readable introduction to politics and personal responsibility and draws on fascinating research in neuroscience. He truly demonstrates how compassion for one another is innate in all of us and urges us to harness our empathy to open up radical changes in our personal, political, and economic structures. Olson’s book is compelling for the research he has done as well as the political and personal notes he includes, and one that can change the way we think about how the culture of capitalism has shaped our thoughts and behavior. The text remains optimistic about the possibilities for political change and provides a daring look at human emotion and morality. The text will fit nicely into introductory political science courses, should be incorporated into contemporary social movement research, and will be especially inspiring to those of us who wish to combine critical research and scholarship with radical teaching.

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