



The Emotions of the Market

Richard Cleminson
(Leeds University)
r.m.Cleminson@leeds.ac.uk

Recibido: 08-03-2012
Aprobado: 10-04-2012

KEYWORDS

Emotions, market, empathy.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Emociones, mercado, empatía.

Recently, Martha C. Nussbaum wrote that we need to look deeply into the psychology of the individual in order to understand how we can be more empathetic with our fellow humans. From its origins in the late nineteenth century through to the ‘industrial psychology’ of the 1920s and 1930s in the United States, where it was twinned with the objective of making for a more efficient workplace and workforce, to a supposedly democratic technique available to all, now dedicated to searching for and providing ‘balance’ in our lives, psychology has now turned to notions of ‘empathy’ as a key to gaining personal equilibrium. Empathy must be one of the most successful political and social novelties to assail us in the current period, racked as it is by any number of just causes and needs from the very basic – hunger, lack of shelter and personal security – through to emotional and material poverty.

As Carolyn Pedwell has illustrated, the ‘empathetic turn’ has ensued over the last thirty years and has seen grow a large collection of advocates and critics analysing the moment from different ideological standpoints including Jeremy Rifkin, Simon Baron-Cohen and Sara Ahmed. Rifkin’s *Empathetic Civilization* sounds inviting and attractive but messages such as his can only be tempered by Ahmed’s work on the cultural politics of emotion. How possible is a real politics or praxis of empathy over the great divides of class background, ‘race’, culture, sex, gender and sexuality? Pedwell, for one, sees the current turn to empathy as a noble attempt to be sympathetic with the plight of one’s other but she clearly illustrates how such empathy can be manufactured, a little like consent as Chomsky has argued, and how it can stumble at the hurdle of its mobilization and co-option by neo-liberal political agendas. If empathy is ‘marketized’ as a trait that is to be sought deep down in all of us, maybe there is little need for strong programmes of overseas aid, eradication of disease, or eradication of the causes of a lack of medical treatment for people with AIDS or whose land has been grabbed by state-backed paramilitaries. Empathy can become as much a comfort drug for those in the West with time and resources as much as being a recipe for inaction to solve the profound problems of the age. To what degree does the exercise of empathy become entangled in the reinforcement of transnational neo-liberal policies and economic modalities rather than a challenge to them? Furthermore, as we are en-

couraged to be empathetic, to what degree has the rise of empathy, usually as an individual stance, taken place in inverse proportion to the decline of collective solidarity?

To date, in any case, commentators have focused on the dynamics and limitations of empathy between human beings across borders and have not discussed the recent exhortation to be empathetic not only with harmed, hurt, under-privileged, deprived, dying human beings, but with non-human actors too. Empathy and its company, emotion, have been recruited to enhance our feelings towards failing and hurt institutions and impersonal entities such as the market. In the newspapers and on broadcasts and in politicians' speeches, we are assailed with the 'depressed' condition of the market, how 'low' or 'down' the market is, how the market fears certain losses, how it has been boosted, how confident it feels and how cautious are its steps towards recovery.

The key function of such empathetic strivings is literally to convince us that, as British Prime Minister David Cameron has stated, 'We are all in this together'; that is, we all share responsibility for the economic and social mess of the world and we must all 'do our bit' to re-balance the ship of capital as it heads inexorably out of the harbour towards a new horizon of plenty and fulfilment once again. Such encouragement to be empathetic with the market's losses and bad days is to engage us anew, to make us feel that the market is part of us and that we are at a loss when she, he or it is in suffering. The emotivity of the desire to see an end to illness and disequilibrium has turned us into human beings whose collective solidarity has become individual empathy for unfortunate human beings and impersonal mega-machines such as the market. Instead of resolving the deep-down problems of an unjust political, economic and environmental system, our concerns – our feelings – are raised to a trans-national emotional word play with a patina of feel-good solidarity that changes little and contributes to the continuation of more of the same.

References

- AHMED, Sara, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2004.
- NUSSBAUM, Martha C., *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, Princeton, N.J./Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2010.
- PEDWELL, Carolyn, 'Economies of Empathy: Obama, Neoliberalism and Social Justice', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 30(2), 2012, pp. 280-297.
- PEDWELL, Carolyn, 'Affective (Self)-Transformations: Empathy, Neoliberalism and International Development', *Feminist Theory*, 13(2) in press (August 2012).
- RIFKIN, Jeremy, *The Empathetic Civilization: The race to global consciousness in a world in crisis*, Cambridge, Polity, 2009.
- ROUTLEDGE, Paul, 'Toward a relational ethics of struggle: embodiment, affinity, and affect', in Randall Amster, Abraham DeLeon, Luis A. Fernandez, Anthony J. Nocella, II and Deric Shannon (eds.), *Contemporary Anarchist Studies: an introductory anthology of anarchy in the academy*, London/New York, Routledge, 2009, pp. 82-92.
- SHUKAITIS, Stevphen, 'Nobody knows what an insurgent body can do: questions for affective resistance', in Jamie Heckert & Richard Cleminson (eds.), *Anarchism and Sexuality: Ethics, Relationships and Power*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2011, pp. 45-66.

