

From the Politics of Compassion to Imagination: Hannah Arendt on Collectivized Affect

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The last decades have seen a so-called “affective turn” in feminist theory, democratic theory, and humanities and social science disciplines more widely.¹ Scholarship on political affect or emotion² – both the prosocial (“positive”) and antagonistic (“negative”) ones³ – has proliferated in various schools of thought, from continental feminist theory, Spinozist-Deleuzian cultural studies, and phenomenology (Szanto and Landweer 2020), to analytic moral theory (Nussbaum 2015).⁴ Underlying this turn to affect is the desire to correct for the alleged excessive rationalism in (neo-Kantian) liberal moral and political theory: the overemphasis on the role of reason, discourse, and rational deliberation in understanding political judgment and collective action. Many of these theorists of affect are committed to progressive politics and do not just *analyze* the affective dimensions of collective political action, they also *valorize* the “collectivization” (Szanto 2020) of emotion – most of all, but not exclusively “positive” emotions – as serving emancipatory causes.

Unlike them, Hannah Arendt scrutinized and castigated the political workings of pity, compassion, and love, in its various guises, such as charity, love of mankind, brother/sisterhood and *Ahabath Israel*, love for the Jewish people. She was also very critical about citizens’ political action based on vicarious feelings of collective guilt (Arendt 1994, 131-2; 2003, 147-8). Affects obviously play a significant role in personal relationships and intimate friendships, Arendt believed, but they are out of order in the public domain and can even cause a lot of harm. Affects are a poor ground for solidarity, engagement with one’s fellow citizens or human beings – who typically are *anonymous* others most of the time – and for political community. This reticence has caused many readers to accuse Arendt of heartlessness.

My aim in this essay is to discuss Arendt's critical exposition of the role of "positive" affect in public affairs, more particularly compassion.⁵ Also, I aim to demonstrate that this criticism does not follow from rationalism, nor, reversely, does it lead to it. Instead of loving or pitying human beings or the Other – *amor homines* – Arendt advocates a much cooler and distant care for the *world* – *amor mundi*.

My argument proceeds in three steps. First, I discuss Arendt's arguments for distrusting compassion in the public sphere, especially when it comes to refugees and the poor and low-skilled workers. In the process, I hope to clarify as much what her criticism does *not* as what it *does* entail. This distrust has caused many readers to accuse Arendt of heartlessness. In response, I want to show that Arendt's reticence does not stem from a commitment to *Realpolitik*, nor from contempt for socially weak groups. Instead of compassion, and empathy, Arendt advocates the kind of *representative thinking* that appeals to imagining the possible points of view of others. In the final section, I evaluate the timeliness of Arendt's criticism of the politics of compassion in the context of the so-called "refugee crises" in Europe, on the one hand, and the upsurge of right-wing populism, on the other.

The Politics of Compassion

Nowhere has Arendt set forth her reservations about the politics of compassion as sharply as in her essay, "The Social Question" (1963). The "social question," or poverty, was key to the French Revolution. The urban proletariat and the poor peasantry who, from 1789, revolted against the privileges and power of the nobility, feudal landlords, clergy, and the absolute monarch, thus bringing the *ancien régime* to an end, demanded bread above all else, i.e., the immediate relief of their misery. The revolution, as is well known, resulted in the bloody Terror of the Jacobins, led by Robespierre. These political activists proclaimed themselves the representatives of the suffering masses in the newly established *Assemblée Nationale*. The politics of compassion that Robespierre advocated involved the revolutionaries' readiness – themselves not belonging to the poor at all – to identify their personal interest with the will of the people, *les misérables*. Here, virtue was understood as selflessness, the ability to lose oneself in the suffering of others. Those within its own ranks who failed to fulfill this

duty were unceremoniously condemned to the guillotine, just like the “enemies of the Revolution,” alleged or not. “Unity and Indivisibility of the Republic. Liberty, Equality and Fraternity – or Death,” read the text on one of the banners of Jacobin activists.

The main source of inspiration for Robespierre’s “terror of virtue” was Rousseau’s political philosophy. Against absolutism, Rousseau declared the people rather than the monarch sovereign. In a just political community, every person gives up their short-sighted self-interest in favor of the common good. The political community results from the workings of affect, in particular, “com-compassion” (literally, the capacity to “suffer-with” others) and “em-pathy” (“feeling-into”). Rousseau considered people’s “innate aversion to see others suffer” a felicitous remnant of their affects in the state of nature, before they became corrupted by modern society (Rousseau 1984, 99).

According to Arendt, the Terror made it clear that violence is not an unfortunate side effect, but the necessary consequence of the Rousseauian politics of compassion. Like all affects, Arendt argues, compassion is by nature “speechless” and inarticulate, because it arises immediately and spontaneously when one sees a fellow human being – and often also other animals, particularly mammals – suffer. So far, Rousseau is right, according to Arendt. Unlike Rousseau, however, Arendt believes that compassion does not provide a proper foundation for political action, judgment, and community. Even the SS officer Adolf Eichmann may not have been lacking in compassion; at least that’s what he tried to make it look like in an interview he gave to the Dutch SS officer Willem Sassen after the War. In it, Eichmann says, among other things, that he could not bear the sight of corpses and he was “deeply affected” by a visit to a concentration camp.⁶ Eichmann may indeed not have been a stranger to compassion, but this did not prevent him from acting as he did.

Compassion, like love, does not care about the formation of judgments in the conversation between citizens “in which someone talks to someone else *about* something that is of interest to both” (Arendt 1963, 86). That “something” Arendt calls the *world*, which consists of man-made things (material objects and artifacts, including institutions and laws) on the one hand, and the immaterial world of shared meanings and stories on the other. Speaking about the world in the presence of others is precisely the stuff of political action, according to Arendt. Seeing others suffer is felt as an incentive to act immediately, without the intervention and mediation

of political or legal institutions, or the often tedious and lengthy process of discussion, persuasion, and negotiation. It is no coincidence that Rousseau, in his *Social Contract* (1762), famously discouraged citizens from engaging in conversations about public matters (Book II, chapter III). This immediacy, Arendt warns, easily leads to violence. This is further reinforced by Rousseau's representations of the political community as an organic unit, literally a "body politic." Compassion leads to homogenization as soon as it enters the public sphere, Arendt believes, because human suffering, with hunger as the clearest example, is uniform to a great extent. "The cry for bread will always be uttered with one voice. Insofar as we all need bread, we are indeed all the same, and may as well unite into one body" (Arendt 1963, 94).

Collectivized compassion may lead to fusion on different levels. First, it tends to lump together those who suffer into a seemingly amorphous mass of misery. Also, in Rousseauian politics, compassion is supposed to unite the elite with this suffering mass, in a grand gesture of solidarity to restore the supposedly authentic and natural bond that society would have lost. And finally, this derivative suffering supposedly unites the (privileged) activists who claim to represent the masses, amongst *themselves*. Any diversity and individuality of citizens – plurality – is thus suppressed.

According to Arendt, the collectivization of compassion is also key to understanding the violent course of successor revolutions, after 1789, that centered on the "social question," such as several communist revolutions in the 20th century. Earlier, in her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), Arendt had warned against the dangers of a compassion-driven course of action in the public domain, considering the plight of the stateless in Europe during the interwar period. After the First World War, millions of former citizens became refugees as a result of the break-up of multinational and multi-ethnic states in Europe, such as the Habsburg Dual Monarchy, the Ottoman Empire, and Russia. The states subsequently brought into existence by peace treaties, such as Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, were created after the model of the nation-state, that is, based on ethnic and cultural homogeneity. Millions of people began to drift: Belarusians, Greeks, Armenians, Bulgarians, Germans, Hungarians, and Romanians. Arendt keenly demonstrated that these displaced persons were forced to leave their country, but in fact, had nowhere and no one to go to and turned stateless as a consequence.

The stateless refugee is disenfranchised and homeless. By being thrown back onto their “natural givenness” (Arendt 1958a, 302), according to Arendt, such a person lacks what makes one properly human, namely a person with the ability to speak and act with others in a common world. Refugees, asylum seekers, and illegal immigrants writes Arendt, are indeed still human, in fact: they are “nothing but” human (300) – a condition which, however, is of no use in our world if one does not dispose of the right papers. Being pitied does not mean that the disenfranchised is recognized as a democratic actor and citizen with a legal personality. “Charity is no right. Charity should come after justice is done [...] To throw [stateless persons] into the lap of charity organizations meant practically: they are completely rightless. [They have] no right to live in the sense [of] no business to be on the earth” (Arendt 1955, 1). Suffering often prompts exactly the opposite of compassion: hatred, resentment, or mysophobia. “It seems that a man who is nothing but a man has lost the very qualities which make it possible for other people to treat him as a fellow-man” (Arendt 1958a, 299-300). Compassion is a volatile emotion. The suffering body, in its “abstract nakedness” (299), can just as well evoke disgust as compassion.

Arendt’s point here is not so much to expose compassion as hypocritical or insincere, for even sincere and truly well-intended compassion can easily lead to the problems mentioned. Rather, she argues that collectivized compassion leads to over-engagement with others, because “pity abolishes the distance, the worldly space between people where political matters... are located” (Arendt 1963, 86). And it is precisely the distance between citizens – their radical plurality – that allows for a public space and political community to come into existence.

Arendt’s predilection for distance is hard for many readers to digest and has earned her the reputation of a cold and elitist intellectual. Yet, unlike the Nietzschean aristocratic pathos of distance, the Arendtian distance does not express the superiority of a strong Lord over the weak. On the contrary, for Arendt, politics has nothing to do with the rule of the few over the many but arises only in the horizontal relationship between very different but equal citizens, nor is it fueled by a commitment to Hobbesian power politics based on well-understood self-interest. Arendt sensitizes us to the fact that engagement presupposes distance. I call this the “paradox of distance and engagement.” This paradox is most strongly expressed in Arendt’s phenomenological conception of the public and

shared world as *inter-esse*, the space between people “which simultaneously relates and separates them” (Arendt 1958b, 52). The common public world is like a table that gathers people, while simultaneously keeping them apart, as everyone sees the table from a different perspective as a principle. What this metaphor also tries to express is that not people, but the world – the table – is at the center of the public domain. “Politics is concerned with the world as such and not with those who live in it” (Arendt 1961, 200). The fact that citizens do not relate to each other directly, but indirectly, mediated through the world – an issue, an event, an institution – obviates over-engagement and emotional fusion and ensures that a public space can arise in which plurality flourishes.

Institutions, including legal ones, play an important role in this mediation. For example, laws and the constitution appeal to standards that are outside of people, but which they nevertheless share with each other. *Amor mundi*, the love or care for the world which Arendt advocates, makes human coexistence possible by providing relative stability and a shared framework of meaning; it is a much cooler love than *amor hominis*: compassion or charity.⁷

Imagination and Representative Thinking

Even though Arendt is cautious to embrace the value of affect in political action, she *does* believe that compassion – or other prosocial emotions, such as love or enthusiasm, or even antagonistic emotions like outrage, for that matter – can and may even need to play a role in spurring people to collective action – such as the struggle for civil rights by disenfranchised groups – in the first place. Gut feelings can give rise to sound moral and political judgments. Arendt speaks not so much of affect or feelings, but of “taste.” Taste immediately discriminates because a thing or event evokes pleasure or displeasure, enthusiasm or aversion, etc. However, a taste sensation is only a start, and thus no sufficient condition for sound political and moral judgments. After all, taste is the most subjective and partisan of all the senses. Taste judgments are hardly communicable: “there is no accounting for taste,” as the saying goes. Judging well is hard work, not simply giving free rein to sentiments, preferences, and prejudices. Imagination and critical thinking play a crucial role in this.

Imagination means trying to put oneself mentally in the possible position of others while knowing one is in fact not there and to imagine how the world appears to them. It means that one is, as it were, “visiting” the perspectives of others that are often fundamentally different from one’s own. No one can ever know for sure how others “really” see the world. It therefore urges people to tell stories. Storytelling is an experimental practice as it always transcends the given, the facts, and forges them into something meaningful. This is why it is not so much a matter of comparing one’s own judgment with the *actual* judgments of others but with their pluralistic *possible* judgments. Nor does it mean that one necessarily adopts the point of view of others; one does not put one’s own judgment out of order.

Political judgment additionally appeals to a faculty that is opposed to the imagination that takes account of others, namely critical reflection. Criticism means thinking for oneself, independent from what others think or may think. Political judgments are “matter of fact,” that is, they are concerned with a particular cause, namely the state of the world that people share with each other and that lies *between* them. That world and not so much people, are at the center of judgment. Therefore, it may seem insensitive, blunt, or arrogant. Yet, unlike compassion, representative thinking does justice to the paradox of distance and engagement, because it does not lead to fusion with the – assumed – affects of others.⁸

Timeliness

Above, I called attention to the case of Eichmann to illustrate the argument that compassion is unfit for grounding political action and judgment. We may now see that his crimes resulted not from a lack of compassion or empathy – which he, in fact, disposed of – but, rather, from a lack of imagination and representative thinking. As Vasterling writes: “[T]his lack of imagination, and in particular, the inability to see the world from the perspective of others, allowed Eichmann to carry out, over the course of several years, the worst imaginable crimes” (Borren and Vasterling 2022).

A first example of the continuing relevance of Arendt’s critique of the politics of compassion is the situation of refugees and migrants in our time, as has been argued by the American-Turkish political philosopher Ayten Gündoğdu. In her book *Rightlessness in an Age of Rights* (2015), Gün-

doğdu argues that Arendt's reflections on statelessness from 1951 have unfortunately not lost their validity. Although our so-called "era of human rights" has since arrived, large groups of people still have an extremely precarious legal position. For example, refugees and illegal immigrants have great difficulty claiming the rights they may formally have, such as the right to legal aid and to appeal against detention or deportation. There is a tension – or sometimes outright contradiction – between human rights and the institutions that are responsible for guaranteeing and enforcing these rights. The precarious legal position of refugees, asylum seekers, and illegal immigrants is partly the result of national (and EU) legislation that tries to restrain international law.

One of Gündoğdu's strongest arguments is that the precarious legal position of marginalized groups is not only the result of strictly legal mechanisms. The most important example is humanitarianism, an approach to human rights based on compassion and administrative management. Humanitarianism reduces human rights issues to problems of suffering bodies and thus risks turning refugees into passive and speechless victims who depend on the volatile affects of others, such as generosity and charity, or into objects of humanitarian administration and technocracy. Human rights conceptions are thus limited to the basic physical needs – "bed, bath, bread" – inherent in our "naked humanity." Refugees are often seen as little more than members of a homogeneous mass of suffering bodies, such as Robespierre's *misérables*, in the case of Europe literally a (Mediterranean) sea of suffering. People who are "no more than human beings" lose their human dignity – in the eyes of others, but also for themselves. As such, compassion can promote rightlessness, despite good intentions.

Arendt's critical exposition of the politics of compassion contains a warning not only for institutions such as governments, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, and human rights courts but also for activists and concerned citizens who want to help refugees and migrants. While part of the European population sees refugees merely as a threat to "our" prosperity and security, another part sees them mainly as victims – not only of foreign aggression, governments that perpetrate violence against their own populations, or of terrorist groups such as IS, but also of geopolitical relations and harsh Western countries – and believes they deserve our hospitality.

Compassion, as mentioned, is volatile and usually has a natural ending, for instance, the moment one realizes that it is impossible to carry the suffering of the whole world on one's shoulders, or that it is sometimes difficult enough to keep one's own daily life on track. Also, when some refugee turns out not to be helpless and destitute, compassion can cause a backlash. Compassion can easily slide into distrust and even hostility, as with the lady I recently heard cry out indignantly that "all those Syrian refugees carry the latest model iPhones." Refugees are often seen as piteous, and vice versa: anyone who is not poor, hopeless, or uneducated is not a *real* refugee. Favors are not rights, however, not even if they come from the goodness of the heart. The fact that current Ukrainian refugees are met with much more compassionate affects among the European citizenry does not alter the fact that, in due time, they will need more than mere favors and charity. A few weeks after the first Ukrainian refugees arrived in other European countries, several who were accommodated by private citizens were already reported to be sent off to public housing projects for supposedly being "too demanding."

A second example shows yet another dubious aspect of the politics of compassion: the fact that it presupposes that we can feel the pain of others. That is rather presumptuous and people often turn out to be wrong. Since the recent revival and victories of (far) right-wing populist and nationalist movements in Europe, the UK, and the US, the highly educated, left-liberal elites have taken to search their own consciences: "we" have not taken the grievances of the mostly low-skilled white voters for Trump/Wilders/Le Pen/Brexit/the AfD seriously enough. This self-criticism is not only paralyzing but often comes down to thinly veiled arrogance. Left-liberal elites study the proverbial "angry white man" just like zoo visitors watch monkeys or scientists investigate their research material, driven by the belief to know exactly what motivates these "Others." For example, blatantly hateful or otherwise harmful prejudices against non-white people, refugees, women, and Jews are framed as "actually" expressing the pain of the so-called "losers of globalization"; a pain that merely receives a destructive translation. Additionally, like the politics of collective guilt, collective self-criticism centers more on care for the self than care for the world. By looking mainly at *themselves*, liberal elites ignore the question of what the common *world* needs right now.

What does it mean to live in a common world? In Arendt's analysis of this issue, humanity has become increasingly integrated through pro-

cesses of globalization in the course of the twentieth century. That means not only that global flows of capital and people have soared but also that risks and responsibilities have become globalized. Issues such as refugee flows, labor migration, pandemics, food and energy security, the availability and reach of weapons of mass destruction, and, especially, climate change transcend the boundaries of the nation-state and seem to have made it anachronistic, while, at the same time, nation-states defend their sovereignty with increasing fervor and aggression. The increasing securitization of borders, the global upsurge of walls, Brexit, and the rise of populist and nationalist movements in Europe, the UK, and the US, are symptoms of this. Moreover, thanks to the new media, we know more about human rights violations everywhere in the world than ever before. Humanity is above all united by “negative solidarity”: we are all in the same boat. This presents us with enormous new responsibilities, but we hardly have any idea what to do with it. Arendt writes in this regard: “[The] idea of humanity, when purged of all sentimentality, has the very serious consequence that, in one form or another, men must assume responsibility for all crimes committed by men [...] It becomes daily clearer how great a burden mankind is for man” (Arendt 1994, 131).

Representative thinking requires us to make present to ourselves a hypothetical view of the position of others and to imagine the world we would like to live in, knowing that we must share it with others with whom we often fundamentally disagree. The perspective on the world that right-wing populists in Europe, the UK, and the US express excludes large groups of people, such as refugees and Muslims, and proves to be anything but pluralistic. The question to be asked to their constituencies is whether excluding others will really lend them a decent paid job, good and affordable housing, education, and care. Their legitimate concerns point to the looming neoliberal superfluosity common to many citizens in Europe, the UK, and the US (not just angry white men).

Perhaps it is precisely the aforementioned negative solidarity, and not the sentimental and misguided identification of self-proclaimed elites with alleged losers, that offers modest clues to the possibility of occasionally talking to one another across dividing lines between “us” and “them.” For, the power of citizens consists in people with different perspectives acting together with a view to the world they share, not in “us” “feeling-with” the pain of the alleged losers of neoliberal globalization.

In conclusion, affect theorists can learn from Arendt that compassion is a bad counselor in *political* affairs. Arendt's criticism does not stem from the often-heard reproach that the elite's compassion with the marginalized and charity is hypocritical, or from a commitment to *Realpolitik*, nor from the contempt for socially weak groups or anti-democratic feelings. Her concern is that over-engagement with the emotions of others robs public issues of their worldly quality. Imagination, representative thinking, and care for the world are Arendtian alternatives for the politics of compassion. As Arendtian representative thinking appeals to the aesthetic faculty of imagination, it avoids the rationalist bias of much neo-Kantian thought on moral and political judgment that affect theorists also seek to challenge.

Notes

- 1 For an overview of the literature that enacted the affective turn, see Gregg and Seigworth 2010.
- 2 "Emotions," "feelings," "affects," and "passions" are each of them translations of the ancient Greek "*pathos*." Henceforth, I will use "affect."
- 3 I borrow these notions from the research project Antagonistic Political Emotion, Center for Subjectivity Research, University of Copenhagen, Denmark.
- 4 For a critical reading of Nussbaum's earlier work on the moral and political value of emotions and the cognitive theory of emotion, see Vasterling 2007a.
- 5 Arendt does not differentiate between "compassion" and "pity" and uses the two interchangeably, perhaps because in German, both translate as "*Mitleid*" (also see the Dutch "*medelijden*").
- 6 The so-called "Sassen Tapes," recorded 1955-1956, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IRflMywj7mQ> (translation mine). Stangneth 2014 contains excerpts from transcripts of the Sassen Tapes.
- 7 On "care for the world" as the proto-normative commitment that informs Arendt's work, see Borren 2023.
- 8 My reading of Arendt's thought on judgment, imagination, its critical and representative moments, and on storytelling is deeply shaped by Veronica Vasterling's work and her distinctly hermeneutic-phenomenological reading of Arendt's thought on judgment (especially Vasterling 2007b) and on storytelling (especially Vasterling 2007a).

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