Political Emotions
Why Love Matters for Justice

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Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice investigates the place of love in a liberal society that aspires to be just. The author, Martha C. Nussbaum is Ernst Freund Distinguished Service Professor of Law and Ethics at the University of Chicago. She takes the reader to a world of explorations of emotions and social justice through her book.

Should liberal societies inculcate certain civic emotions to guard against division? In Political Emotions Martha Nussbaum argues that “Love” is the most significant emotion to achieve a ‘decent’ liberal society that aspires to justice and equal opportunity for all and inspires individuals to sacrifice for the common good. Anger, fear, envy, guilt, grief, the desire to inflict shame upon others – all of these are endemic to all societies. Nussbaum claims, public emotions rooted in Love can keep at bay these forces.

Nussbaum finds a problem in the history of Liberalism that liberal political philosophers ignored the ‘political cultivation of emotion’. John Locke acknowledged a problem of widespread animosity between members of different religions. Nussbaum points, however, Lock made no attempt to delve into the psychological origins of intolerance. Immanuel Kant also took the same stance. In Religion within the Limits of Mere Reason, Kant talks about “Radical evil”, but took the position that the liberal state itself was highly limited in its war against radical evil, writes Nussbaum. John Rawl’s A Theory of Justice (1972) hit the topic of political emotions, but Nussbaum points out that Rawls work was also not complete since he left a space for a needed account of a “reasonable moral psychology”.

The issue of emotional support for a decent public culture has not been entirely neglected by liberal thinkers, writes Nussbaum in chapter one. Jean –Jacques Rousseau imagined of a “civil religion”, creating strong bonds of civic love between
citizens and to the country as a whole. John Stuart Mill imagined a “religion of humanity”, providing the basis for policies involving personal sacrifice and comprehensive altruism. In a very similar way, Rabindranath Tagore imagined a “religion of man” that would inspire people to promote the improvement of living conditions for all the world’s inhabitants. August Comte also developed his own “religion of humanity” which included public rituals and other emotion-laden symbols imposed on citizens. But Nussbaum finds all these solutions unsatisfactory. In her book she aims to provide ways to infuse this civic emotion among citizens.

Political Emotions is then divided into three parts. In part 1, “History”, Nussbaum explains the problems of political emotions, which aspects of historical, philosophical and musical texts are relevant to discuss about an egalitarian society. In chapter two, she brings the opera The Marriage of Figaro by Mozart and De Ponte, to focus on the construction of sentiments. She points out that the opera should be regarded as a philosophical text in the unfolding debate about new forms of public culture – a liberal democracy. For Nussbaum, the opera gives a central place to the cultivation of emotions. It investigates the human sentiments that are the necessary foundation for a public culture of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Nussbaum says, this construction of sentiments is accomplished more clearly in Mozart’s music than in the libretto (text). Highlighting the contrast between male and female characters (with Cherubino), Nussbaum points out the significant role women play in inculcating civic love. Later, in chapter three and four, she further clarifies the philosophical issues by engaging philosophers especially Comte, Mill and Tagore.

In part II, “Goals, Resources, Problems” Nussbaum surveys the resources at our disposal and the psychological problems obstructing our path. For Nussbaum, the core value of an aspiring society is the idea of human equality and dignity. In chapter 6 and 7, she writes on the role of developing emotions in advancing a society to fuller social justice and stability. Positive emotions, especially Compassion are discussed from a comparative analysis on the emotional tendencies and capacities of humans and animals. A liberal society needs to understand the roots of human bad behavior, says Nussbaum. She contends that the foundation for ‘radical evil’ lay at the infancy period. The unmet needs of a helpless infant put him into a state of tension and anxiety.

In Part III, ‘Public Emotions’, Nussbaum further illustrates her point, focusing on the United States and India. For Nussbaum, the crucial question at this
juncture is how to shape the emotions that citizens feel toward their nation. Nussbaum says, patriotism is a strong emotion, a form of love which involves the feeling that the nation is one’s own. Great democratic leaders, including Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, and Jawaharlal Nehru, have understood the need to touch citizen’s hearts to develop patriotism. The illustration also gives an account of the atrocities and injustices these political leaders addressed in love of their country. Finally, Nussbaum argues that emotions rooted in love can combat - fear, envy, and shame – that pose special problems for compassionate citizenship.

Political Emotion is a beautiful synthesis of political liberalism and psychology of emotions. It is a long, beautifully written book which engages a number of themes. The book demonstrates how people from different walks of life can be brought together around a common set of values. Nussbaum reinstates the value of emotions in political life. The book is a rich source of information for academicians and the general public. Though the narration of themes is extraordinary, few questions arose while reading the book.

My first concern is all about the psychology of emotions. The illustration of emotional development in infancy failed to cover prominent attachment theorists like John Bowlby. Nussbaum considers helplessness in infants is a setting stage for radical evils, whereas Bowlby argues that helplessness in infants is the driving force towards an intense infant-mother attachment. A secure attachment would naturally bring in positive emotions in infants. Nussbaum missed this vital part of emotional development.

My next concern is on ‘Radical evils’. Nussbaum’s ‘radical evils’ are necessarily bad for liberal societies? Or are they necessary for an aspiring just society. One wouldn’t agree this contention easily. For example, let’s think of a strong political emotion, say ‘Patriotism’. The citizens’ capacity to evoke and feel bad emotions may trigger actions rooted in patriotic love. Let me point out a turning point in Mahatma Gandhi’s life. On June 9th, 1893, Mahatma Gandhi was travelling from Durban to Pretoria on a first class train. Upon seeing a ‘colored’ man, a European approached the railway authorities and asked that he may be removed from the compartment. When Gandhiji refused, he was thrown off the train with his baggage. The humiliation he felt was intolerable. An array of negative emotions – shame, fear, guilt, envy, and disgust – resulted with this incident. Mahatma Gandhi’s Patriotic move began with this.
My final concern revolves around the heart of the book, “Love”. I find two types of difficulties to inculcate “Love” as envisioned by Nussbaum. The first one arises out of the nature of this emotion. Love is a powerful emotion, which brings a spark within. Therefore, it requires self-reflections to understand the operations. Music, art, dance, and literature may provide a partial answer to this, but not sufficient. The second difficulty arises as a result of the prevailing nature of inequalities in certain societies. Nussbaum’s ideals about inculcating positive emotions in citizens are highly appreciable. However, this wouldn’t be feasible in a country where citizen’s needs are not uniform. Economically backward or poor societies strive to meet the physiological needs. Unless they find a true mechanism to combat poverty, it may be hard for them to endeavor to an emotion which is high up in the need ladder. Now the big question is how political emotions can be cultivated among citizens!!