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Abstract

Review of *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice* by Martha C. Nussbaum (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2013).

Martha C. Nussbaum, one of the world's most respected and prolific philosophers, is perhaps best known for her capabilities approach to human development, developed in tandem with Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen and others. This approach posits that a decent society guarantees all people the freedoms and opportunities they need to enjoy rich, rewarding, and fully realized lives. These include, at minimum, freedom from hunger, poverty and chronic joblessness; sufficient resources to access basic nutrition, healthcare, and education; and opportunities to relate to others and engage in deliberative processes that give all a meaningful say in determining the quality of their communities. In essence, this capabilities approach is one powerful way to define the foundations of human well-being. It furthermore envisions a society where privileged elites are subordinated to a democratic ethos in which everyone willingly makes sacrifices to promote the common good of all.

The problem that Nussbaum takes up with great boldness and imagination in the book under review -*Political emotions: Why love matters for justice* - is the highly practical matter of how to achieve and sustain the sort of society Nussbaum desires. That is, what are the means by which the vast majority of our fellow citizens can be persuaded to commit their time, their resources, and their passions to making such a capabilities-rich society a reality? In trying to help us understand what it might take to get many millions of people to participate in the achievement of such a state, Nussbaum argues painstakingly and cautiously for the indispensable role of activating people's most powerful and positive emotions, especially compassion and love. She contends that love, in particular, grants people the imaginative and motivating engagement with others that helps to make sacrifice and social activism possible. Notions of respect and dignity, while necessary, are in the end too weak to stir the human heart. Only love can sustain the creation of a community in which all are valued and no member is regarded as any less complete or human than any other.

The problem then remains: what does it look like to animate such emotions as compassion and love for the common good? What practices, rituals, celebrations, and traditions can be exploited to gain the emotional support of a nation?

One approach that Nussbaum explores at length involves public ceremonies and public speeches that articulate a vision of the sort of inclusive, cooperative, and altruistic nation that must eventually be achieved in order to establish the conditions for realizing human well-being. Whether it is the speeches of Lincoln or King in the U.S. or the public pronouncements of Tagore, Gandhi or Nehru in India, what these ceremonies and declarations have in common is an expression of global justice and universal love that unites people, while also helping them to imagine the role they might play in making such a vision a reality.

Indeed, in the case of Dr. King, it was love that he invoked again and again in his greatest speeches. His call for a beloved community that was all-inclusive, unconditionally respectful, and deeply humble about the limits of human knowledge and understanding, and yet constantly in quest of greater understanding and deepened wisdom, were all reminders of the kind of society he and his followers sought to create. The enthusiasm,

the passion, and, yes, the love that animated such a vision are what gave his calls for change such staying power and why they still resonate with so many of us today.

Nussbaum warns that deciding on which strategies for arousing positive emotions are most appropriate and effective will vary from one culture to the next. In particular she points out that Gandhi's approaches in India were distinct from Dr. King's in the U.S and that these differences were almost entirely a function of cultural and political differences. For instance, in the case of India the public pronouncements she cites have to do with the founding of an independent state. In the case of the U.S., the examples have more to do with finally realizing the promise of American democracy as articulated in the Declaration of Independence. She also notes that in an effort to stir positive emotions, traditional assumptions about gender roles, about entrenched notions of what counts as masculine and feminine, can also create difficulties and contribute to a perpetuation of deep-seated prejudices. Such prejudices must be guarded against and should not be tolerated as they have a tendency to marginalize huge populations of otherwise eager participants.

What also seems critical to Nussbaum is the value of maintaining an openness to many forms of love – love for children, for friends, for romantic partners, for sports teams, even for democratic principles – as a strategy for recruiting new enthusiasts for a more inclusive and self-sacrificing community. Such a community rejects the idea that it is ever necessary for any person to suffer the indignities of hunger, poverty, racism, sexual harassment, or mis-education. As with all of these forms of love, as well as many others, positive interactions are reinforced and feelings are unleashed that, in Nussbaum's view, ultimately lead to increased levels of cooperation, altruism, and caring within the larger society.

Nussbaum goes on to observe that despite the different approaches different nation states might take to express unconditional regard for all its people, the loves that prompt healthy interactions are likely to have a number of features in common that include: “a concern for the beloved as an end rather than a mere instrument; respect for the human dignity of the beloved; a willingness to limit one's own greedy desires in favor of the beloved” (p. 382). All of these loves are exactly the kind of loves that need to be extended to all members of the community, which, again, is what can make love such a powerful basis for building a more sustainable and just society.

At one point, she concedes that patriotic appeals to the nation state can be highly problematic and worries about how quickly such appeals can degenerate into cries for war or cruel targeting of the most vulnerable groups. But she also insists quite persuasively that a nation pursuing goals requiring sacrifice and subordination of self-interest needs to be able to appeal to love of nation in ways that embrace positive emotion, inspiring memories and gripping narrative. In the absence of such emotional appeals, she insists, those who wish to relieve poverty, foster racial justice, and advance democracy will find themselves overshadowed by groups with far less benign intentions and unifying aims. Such groups will, in fact, enthusiastically utilize ritual, elaborate ceremony and grand narrative to divide populations and undermine democracy.

At the same time, the community that Nussbaum imagines based in love is not a coercive one. It does not say that we must all behave one way or love the same things. It is extremely heterogeneous. And, as Nussbaum says, it is a society that invites but does not coerce, which means that a critical spirit is maintained in which everything is subject to inquiry and further consideration, in which everything is provisional and up for grabs *except* the notion that some are less valued than others. This is the inviolable principle that fuels love and upon which public rituals and ceremonies and stories, as well as systems of education, must be constructed.

Confronted with the enormous challenge of striving to recreate a society built on capabilities in which personal self-sacrifice is one of the necessary foundations for substantive change, reformers are advised to read Nussbaum's new book with care. Reason, careful weighing of alternatives, and relentless advocacy are essential but insufficient. Progressive leaders would do well to activate a few positive emotions in the service of their reforms. They should unabashedly use love to stir people's imaginations and to help them visualize themselves as change agents and advocates for a public good in which self-actualization is possible for everyone.

Author Information

Stephen Preskill is Professor Emeritus at Wagner College and co-author with Stephen Brookfield of *Learning as a Way of Leading: Lessons From the Struggle for Social Justice* published by Jossey-Bass. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.