

# Populism's four driving emotions, and how to cultivate emotions supporting democracy

## *An interview with Eva Illouz*

WE ARE DELIGHTED to present this interview with world renowned sociologist Eva Illouz. She currently holds the position of Directrice d'Études at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris and is the Rose Isaac Chair in Sociology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Her research focuses on the interlinkages between capitalism, emotions, gender, culture, love, sexuality, and freedom in the modern world. Notable among her works are: *Consuming the romantic utopia: love and the cultural contradictions of capitalism* (1997); *Cold intimacies: the making of emotional capitalism* (2007); *Why love hurts: a sociological explanation* (2012); *The end of love: a sociology of negative relations* (2019). (For an in-depth exploration of Illouz's intellectual trajectory, see Engdahl 2020).

In her book *The end of love: a sociology of negative relations* (2019), Illouz posits that modern sociology must reorient itself to comprehend the significant phenomena of 'negative relations', 'negative sociality' or non-binding interaction. Previously, modern sociology analyzed the formation of social bonds in terms of processes of institutionalization, culture, and norms. However, contemporary sociology must dedicate itself to understanding the non-formation of bonds, given the prevalence of fleeting relationships in our hyper-connected modernity. Examples of such 'negative' relationships include one-night stands, zipless fucks, hook-ups, friends with benefits, and cybersex. These short-lived relationships often entail minimal self-involvement and emotional attachment, as the sole aim of the actors is sexual gratification, driven by a form of autotelic hedonism (Illouz 2019:20). This non-bonding dynamic has reached a critical mass, reshaping not only our erotic lives but also our broader social existence as we strive to keep our options as open as possible. Eva boldly asserts that 'Contemporary relationships end, break, fade, evaporate, and follow a dynamic of positive and negative choice, which intertwines bonds and non-bonds.' (Illouz 2019:21). Dissolution and marketization are the names of the capitalist consumerist game of individuals freely pursuing their 'anomic desires' in this diagnosis. (For a comprehensive discussion of Illouz's book *The end of love*, see Poder 2020).

In her latest book – *The emotional life of populism: how fear, disgust, resentment, and*

*love undermine democracy* (2023) – Illouz delves into an analysis of how modern life is characterized by mobilization of normative populist ideologies and movements that pose a threat to modern democracy. She explores how and why political figures and governments garner support from individuals who are, in fact, the most adversely affected by populist policies that exacerbate social inequalities. Illouz unveils that populist politics thrive on a blend of fear, disgust, resentment, and love for one's country. The synergy of these four emotions, constantly present in the political arena, fuels the rise and persistence of populism.

This interview primarily centers around Illouz's latest book but also touches on the role of social media in propagating negative emotions, strategies for cultivating emotions such as fraternity and hope to sustain modern democracy, and the contemporary era marked by societal self-destruction and unprecedented catastrophes.

In this context, the interview with Illouz intersects with Hartmut Rosa's perspective, as featured in this special issue. Rosa contends that we are in a state of aggression, not resonance, with the world, with other humans, and even with ourselves. This war-like stance towards the world shapes individuals' emotional structures and lives, manifesting in aggressive emotions such as resentment and the desire for revenge. Both Rosa and Illouz identify these self-destructive emotions, including disgust, fear, resentment, and paternalist love, as expressions of the zeitgeist. However, Illouz provides the most comprehensive analysis of these self-destructive emotions—disgust, fear, resentment, (paternalist) love—and connects them to political populism.

Towards the end of the interview, Eva Illouz reflects on a fundamental question that has remained central to her sociological work: the nature of the modern subject, a question Foucault gave certain answers to. Answers that are not sufficient according to Illouz who differentiates herself from Foucault in several ways, as she explains in the interview.

The overarching theme of the interview revolves around the role of emotions in political and social life. While the analytical framework of four basic populist emotions is developed through a deep analysis of the Israeli case, it is suggested that this framework can be applied to populist tendencies worldwide. Furthermore, the interview asserts that sociology would be remiss to consider resentment solely relevant in understanding right-wing politics, as this emotion also plays a role in leftist woke policies. Lastly, the dynamics of populist emotions can be observed in more centrist policy positions. Moderate and democratic politicians have been observed to invoke populist emotions, such as fear and love, in various contexts, including the discourse on crime in Sweden (see Hermansson 2023), especially evident during the Covid-19 and Climate crises, which are also discussed in the interview.

\*\*\*

*Marcus: We have read your latest book with great interest. Why did you choose to explore the emotional life of populism?*

Eva: From the beginning of my career, I have been trying to understand how economic transformations impact on emotional life. I have delved into the significant role that capitalism has played in shaping romantic love and practices, driven by the ideologies of individualism and consumerism. I have also maintained a keen interest in the role of culture in emotional life. Politics cannot be disentangled from cultural frames. Politics is a powerful way to institutionalize emotions. However, the motivation behind this book also stems from the changing landscape of democracies worldwide. Many nations around the world want to renegotiate the relationship between the majority and minority groups. Majorities no longer want to protect minorities. In part this is because democracies have become multi-cultural societies by conscious design or decision. In part this was because immigrants were a much-needed cheap workforce after World War II. So, I wrote this book about populist politics in Israel, long before the current government in Israel.

I also became fascinated by the salience of what Spinoza termed ‘sad passions’ in public life, the fact that sometimes, some groups may choose self-destruction if it means bringing down a despised group with them. Self-destruction has been a topic that has interested psychologists. It should interest sociologists as well. Why do some groups become entirely blind to their interests? We are destroying everything we have been fighting for the last two hundred years, liberty, equality, fraternity, a stable political system through economic prosperity for all. I find it urgent to understand why some groups prefer to destroy the society in which they live.

So, the book is an attempt to understand how populist leaders come to tell plausible stories which make such emotions as disgust, resentment, or fear operative in the public sphere. I take Israel as my case study, but even if Israel is, I think, paradigmatic of populism around the world, the emotional dynamic of populism needs to be studied empirically in every country. We need to understand political actors as emotional actors. They are mobilized by narratives which contain key emotional approaches to the world.

*Poul: When you say emotional actor, would that suggest that people are becoming less reflexive, less using their rational capacities today?*

Eva: In fact, quite the opposite. Emotions, rationality, and reflexivity develop together and are not opposed, although I subscribe to Daniel Kahneman’s distinction between system one (intuitive) and system two (analytical). I do think that cognitively we likely employ different modes of thinking and reacting to the world, whether we do this fast or slow. We are better at doing certain tasks with system one or system two. But I don’t view these two systems as entirely separate. Not at all. I think capitalist culture fosters both: a formal rational and instrumental thinking that is far more pervasive than in the past. Yet, consumer culture promotes an emotional, a sensuous

and hedonist approach to human agency. I am not introducing a novel perspective here. Daniel Bell and, to some extent, Max Weber, recognized this dynamic well. There are institutionalized systems of rationality and reflexivity, as well as institutionalized systems for the expression of emotions.

Take psychology or psychoanalysis, for instance; they represent institutionalizations of both systems. They serve as institutionalizations of reflexivity. On the other hand, psychology takes not only emotions very seriously, but compels individuals to do so as well. It necessitates naming and acknowledging emotions in one's consciousness and that of others involved in interactions. This creates a new social reality because social actors now increasingly negotiate around their subjective life, their emotions. So that's an example of how rational reflexivity and emotions coexist. Not only is psychology reflexive, but I would also say it is promoting an instrumental form of thinking. For example, it is a praxis that aims to make you better aware of your interests. So, in a way psychology teaches you to have a more utilitarian approach to emotions, that is, to experience more often pleasure and to pursue a pleasure which does not conflict with your self-interest. The same goes for politics. We have never witnessed such a sophisticated apparatus for instrumentally controlling the political process, and yet, we would have no trouble claiming this process is now imbued with many forms of irrationality and emotions.

*Poul: [In your book] when you talk about love, is 'love' here used as a kind of synonym of loyalty? Or is there a finer distinction between this kind of love and then loyalty?*

Eva: I refer to love for the nation and love for the leader not to the Christian Agape, the love of other people with an infinite charitable spirit. Machiavelli famously advised the prince to be both feared and loved. But he recognized you could probably not have the two at the same time. Of the two, fear is preferable. It's more politically efficient. But you must always be careful not to be too feared, because if you're too feared, then you become hated. And if you become hated, then you lose your grip on power. I think that in modern politics love is more expected than fear and loyalty is particularly acutely cultivated by leaders who, in Weberian terms, do not govern either by tradition or by rational authority. Trump is known for demanding a total loyalty to the point of fealty. Populist leaders create a kind of paternalistic relationship to their citizens and become figures people love. I think Donald Trump or Viktor Orbán are loved by many of their followers. For example, a part of the Israeli population used to call Bibi 'King of Israel'. For them he is a benevolent and loving King because he brings them self-respect and because he is spiteful of the people they hate. They also love these figures because they promise security and the restoration of an old social order in which white men were more powerful. There is a kind of restorative nostalgia in the love of populist leaders.

*Poul: Is it a form of paternalistic love to love the person who can secure your comfort and safety?*

Eva: Absolutely. The appeal of some populist leaders lies precisely in their ability to project an image of caring for individuals who feel invisible in society. It is imperative to grasp the significant role that love plays in populist politics. Many populist supporters harbor feelings of being overlooked, invisible, and humiliated by new moral codes they do not understand or agree with, sidelined by an economy which relies increasingly on information and knowledge. Many people do not want to share the resources of the welfare state with other groups, immigrants in particular, and when that feeling is labeled as racist, the humiliation turns into rage. They feel punished twice: First, by what they perceive as diminishing public resources, and second, for their opinions.

It is crucial to clarify, however, that the view that immigrants are depleting a nation's wealth is often inaccurate. Immigrants have made substantial contributions to the economies of prosperous nations, not to mention their demographic contributions. Despite these facts, many still feel invisible, and populists have effectively exploited this by offering a false sense of visibility and significance.

Trump or a Zemmour or a Wilders or a Farage tell people who feel humiliated: 'I see your pain. Our country is great, and our resources are limited. Why should we share them with others?' This is the heart of the power of populist leaders. The populist leader can then appear as the one who promises to bring back the country to a time where hierarchies were clearer. For me Trump's election was a major event in my intellectual life. Trump represented the exact inversion of all the values of American democracy – despite its history of colonialism, proxy wars, and brutal exploitation of African Americans. It took me a long time to understand that what his voters loved about him was precisely the fact that he was so outrageous, and that the outrageousness of Trump was a way for them to poke the eye of those who want to extend more rights for minorities. The more Trump was outrageous, the more he was perceived as a courageous knight with a shiny armor defending them. What we perceived as moral progress – they perceived as arrogance and delegitimation of their anxieties.

In the end, I think there are two political habituses which are now strongly opposed: one which is universalist, cosmopolitan, multi-culturalist and anti-racist; the other which wants to privilege the nation, the majority group and which thereby views our moral codes as foreign and imposed. Political opinions are no longer just opinions. They have become identities, or rather more than identities. They are now mega-identities. They take a great deal of space in the self-definition of people, on the right and on the left. Emotions feed into that process of construction of mega-political identities.

*Poul: All people can feel somehow envious of others. Could the notion of 'democratic' resentment also extend to the realm of woke and left-wing identity politics?*

Eva: It is interesting that you connected the two because, in my analysis, resentment is very much connected to the right side of the political landscape. I am aware that for Nietzsche resentment is the true motivation behind the demand for justice and equality. However, in the case of Israel, its trajectory takes on a more complex and

ambivalent character. Resentment was voiced by the under-class of Mizrahim (Jews of Arab countries) against the Ashkenazim (Jews of European origins). Mizrahim have been genuinely discriminated against, in a way that is rather extreme in comparison with discrimination in other democratic countries. They formulated their resentment by using the tropes of democracy, but they introduced an extreme right wing populist politics shrouded in religion. Now, returning to your question about whether we can also associate resentment with the identity politics of the woke left.

First and foremost, I would say resentment is the normal reaction to a meritocracy that has failed. It is worth recalling that meritocracy serves as the prevailing ideology in contemporary societies. Once the aristocracy collapsed and the division of societies into estates or castes ceased to be viable, defining all human beings as equals necessitated a justification for the allocation of resources. The solution that emerged was meritocracy. Now, if there is one thing we know for sure, is that meritocracy did not work. Everybody with eyes to see can observe that it is not the most talented, or the more virtuous, or the most hard-working people who have the most access to wealth and happiness. And not only did meritocracy not work, but it also works much less today than it used to work in the thirty years ago. That is certainly true in America where, for example, access to university and college has become extraordinarily and outrageously difficult for even the middle classes.

So, meritocracy has spectacularly failed for the working class and for the middle classes. If you follow the thesis of Daniel Markovitz's book, it has failed both for the working classes and for the elites, albeit for different reasons. The first because they have much less resources than expected and can no longer pursue paths of social mobility and the latter, due to their incessant work commitments, see their personal relationships erode from within. However, it's noteworthy that only the working class tends to react with resentment. Resentment is a legitimate response to the shortcomings of meritocracy and the exacerbation of inequality. Yet, under certain circumstances, it vitiates democracy from within. When directed towards experts, knowledge, or minorities who have experienced improved conditions, resentment assumes an anti-democratic character.

Secondly, Israel is a very interesting case because the Mizrahim - immigrants who came from North Africa - entered politics not through a universalist and emancipatory message but through religion, and religion and identity politics have provided a new way to articulate their resentment as religious actors who very much hold onto their identity. Their identity politics mimicked the identity politics of the left, to use Homi Bhabha's expression. It's a mimicry, but not of the colonizer as in Homi Bhabha. But a mimicry of the claim to equality promoted by the left, of the identitarian left. They used the language of victimhood, of rights, of denunciation of inequality, of oppression, not to promote a more just society but to gain new privileges, to sideline Arab minorities, to establish Jewish supremacy. They put forward a regressive political agenda. The party Shas, which represents this constituency, is a populist, xenophobic, racist party. But this party was never denounced by the regular left because it represented the downtrodden, as if being a victim gave you a kind of moral passport to go

everywhere you want to go. The woke left has failed in identifying early on that their strategy was a regressive one. The woke left should have been able to denounce this party, even if it represented a group which had been historically discriminated against. Being a victim does not exculpate you from being racist, xenophobic, anti-Arab and populist.

Victimized groups can legitimately enter the political arena if they offer an emancipatory and inclusive politics. That is, they should fight not only for themselves but for other groups as well. If they retreat into the borders of their group and identity, it is much easier to fall into a form of ‘wounded attachment’ – to use Wendy Brown’s words – which substitutes for political identity and becomes full of resentment and hatred. An example of a successful emancipatory politics was that of the civil rights movement in America led by Martin Luther King.

*Marcus: In your prior work, for instance in Cold intimacies, you explored the impact of social media on emotional life. What role does social media play in the emotional life of populism?*

Eva: Social media occupy an ambivalent position in our society. They offer a platform for individuals to express their thoughts and opinions freely. However, they also serve as channels for disseminating information. This dual role has led to a blurring of the lines between personal expression and factual information, eroding the concept of objectivity and the existence of verifiable facts as foundations for forming judgments and opinions.

Daniel Kahneman has this notion of ‘cognitive ease’ which I think is very important to understand what happens on social media. Cognitive ease refers to the speed with which you process information. There are all kinds of ways to make information easier to process. The quicker you process an information and the less likely you are to make the effort to check if it is accurate, coherent, plausible. I think the social media changes the cognitive environment into one in which you process things with a great deal of cognitive ease and are much less encouraged to, you know, to do what you do normally when you want to know something, for example gathering conflicting information, checking sources, making sense of something considering what we already know. Reasoning, which is essentially a sequence of cognitive operations, becomes a challenging endeavor in such an environment. In essence, social media engender an environment characterized by a high degree of cognitive ease, where the very notion of objective, verifiable facts often dissipate.

Moreover, social media encourage quick reactions because they thrive on what’s called ‘virality’. Virality refers to speed of circulation and volume of the people you can reach. Which messages get viral? There are studies that show that the contents that are most viral are the emotional contents. Another characteristic of virality is the notion of ‘contagion’, which I find an extremely interesting notion when you study emotions.

*Poul: How can we understand the phenomenon of contagion?*

Eva: I would suggest there are three models to understand how an emotion becomes contagious, as observed by individuals predating the era of social media by a century: Emile Durkheim, Gabriel Tarde, and Gustave Le Bon.

In Durkheim's view, we all feel the same thing in synchrony with a totem, a sacred symbol, to constitute a community. The symbol and the sacredness of the symbol is, in fact, a manifestation of the feelings that underlies social activities in the community. When a group attunes itself synchronously and engages symbolically with a sacred concept, everyone within that group experiences similar emotions at the same time. This is the case when half of the world is watching the Mondial for example. This model fit very well pre-cable TV, but it does not fit well with social media because social media are not synchronously attuned to the same reality.

Gabriel Tarde, who has been forgotten by the sociological canon, offered a model of social life based on imitation. It's a powerful model that has not received the attention it deserves in the social sciences except for Elihu Katz, a prominent communications scholar. In the last twenty years of his life, Katz delved into Tarde's ideas to explain how information spreads in society through mass media. For Tarde and Katz, the model of viruses could apply to social life, that is, an idea or an emotion could spread through more and more people through imitation. But Tarde lacked a robust theory explaining which contents or meanings people were more likely to imitate.

The third model is the one of Gustave Le Bon, who wrote a famous book we have come to despise because it was so full of nineteenth century anti-democratic prejudice, *The crowd: a study of the popular mind*. But he does speak about this phenomenon of crowds whereby the leader is able to operate a mental and emotional change in those who follow him by bringing them to a state where the normal defenses of civilization are down.

All three of these models presuppose the physical co-presence of people in the same space. None of them really explains how contagion happens when you are interacting with a video or an image. Nevertheless, they serve as useful frameworks to consider the importance of identifying a key, sacred meaning, acknowledging the resemblance to the spread of viruses, and recognizing the need for ordinary defenses to be lowered.

*Marcus: Do you believe that certain emotions are promoted through social media?*

Eva: I have not studied the topic, but I know there is research showing that social media contribute to the polarization of a public life because the messages that get more attention are the ones expressing negative emotions. Psychologist Jonathan Haidt and Tobias Rose-Stockwell argue that there may be something in our current media and technological environment which subtly encourages anger. If you constantly express anger in your private conversations, your friends will likely find you tiresome, but when there's an audience, the payoffs are different – and they argue rightly I think that outrage can boost your status. A study conducted by William Brady and fellow researchers at NYU analyzed the reach of half a million tweets and found that each



moral or emotional word used in a tweet increased its virality by an average of twenty percent. Another study by the Pew Research Center showed that posts exhibiting ‘indignant disagreement’ received nearly twice as much engagement, including likes and shares, as other types of content on Facebook.

However, it’s worth noting that it’s not only movements with moral claims that spread through social media. Quite possibly, social media may also foster an objectless mass anger, an anger with no clear aim, whose object is vague and inarticulate and is born out of contagion. This seems to have been the main characteristics of the riots which convulsed France this summer. Young people with no or little political claims put on fire and destroyed hundreds of public and private buildings throughout France. The initial trigger was the death of a young man at the hand of the police, and the context involved the lack of social integration of young immigrants. The anger quickly spread not because the rioters voice any clear moral claim but because anger became contagious, inflaming entire crowds through its sheer power of combustion.

*Marcus: The notion of virality and cognitive ease on social media is intriguing when considering the emotional life of populism. At the same time, there are people using social media for other purposes, such as learning and self-education. How do you view these various forms of online activity?*

Eva: Obviously, there are a variety of positive uses of social media. But researchers like Jonathan Haidt tend to hold the view that, overall, the effects are largely negative. For instance, one consistent finding seems to be that adolescents spend much less time with friends than before. They also worry much more about their physical appearance. Haidt goes as far as attributing an increase in suicide rates among adolescents to social media. But even if you do not take a psychological approach and try to understand the overall inscription of this technology in the social and cultural ecology of contemporary societies, I believe the overall effect tend to be negative. If you go back to Adorno and Horkheimer’s famous analysis of culture and capitalism, the blending of culture, economy and technology is completed. An app store, for instance, encompasses everything from books, movies, music, self-help, financial apps, dating apps. It has become a space where the entire world is monetized and technologized, transforming the nature of work, social interactions, wealth circulation, accumulation rates, sharing, and distribution within society. It weaves capitalist corporations and technologies effortlessly into our daily lives, introducing algorithmic logic in our choices. We have witnessed a profound transformation of sociality.

*Marcus: Speaking of societal transformation. Do you believe that we experience unique times, and if so, in what ways?*

Eva: The novelty of what we are living through is important to grasp. Many things are new in the current situation. Firstly, the extent to which societies have become multicultural challenges fundamental conceptions of culture, belonging, and even

groupness. We live simultaneously in nation-states and in global realities, those of climate change for example or those of international flows of populations. This juxtaposition redefines what constitutes a group.

Secondly, technology has never before played such a pivotal role in the formation and dissemination of knowledge and information. It represents a cognitive revolution as radical, if not more so, than the printing press. Information now circulates at unprecedented speeds, and the concept of information based on facts seems to have lost its relevance. Instead, what gets expressed are raw feelings. The internet serves as a vast platform to help circulate emotions, feelings, prejudice. The entities controlling this technology have become gigantic mammoths of a kind we have never seen before. Yet, we increasingly subscribe to an unprecedented form of morality which prohibits us from being racists or sexists. This creates extraordinary confrontation which is capitalized by social media because they thrive on virality and virality thrives on conflict. The power wielded by giants like Google or Amazon is unprecedented and it is not only economic, but also economic, cultural, and emotional.

The third aspect is the level of inequality. While inequality has always existed, it has reached an extent that is unparalleled. But it now exists under a regime of visibility, where the lives of the wealthy and powerful, or simply those above you, are constantly on display. When coupled with egalitarian ideals, this visibility makes inequality intolerable and highly explosive. Lastly, education plays a significant role in dividing social groups today. Half a century ago, there were bridges connecting working-class individuals to the educated. However, these bridges have vanished. The inequality in knowledge has generated an attack on what was, what still is the key groups and ideas of Enlightened modernity, namely knowledge and experts, and on the core values of the Enlightenment, such as knowledge and truth.

The divide between the educated and the uneducated is unprecedented. The educated are wealthier, eat differently, live longer, live in cities, are cosmopolitans. What sustains populism is the uneducated and their deep resentment, not so much towards wealth, but towards expertise. This is why figures like Trump embody what it means to be uneducated. Despite having attended a prestigious university, he acts in a manner that rejects the refined character of education. He acts in a vulgar way because this is the signifier of un-education. This rejection of knowledge became especially evident during the pandemic when Trump supporters refused to accept the vaccine. Incidentally, this is also why GOP voters died of the virus in much greater numbers.

*Poul: You write about the role of dynamic religion in sustaining fraternal spirits and claim that churches and religious communities play an important role in this regard. If we should look forward, what can we do to cultivate emotions that facilitate a democratic society?*

Eva: Which emotions should a good civil society encourage? I want to make a difference between me and Martha Nussbaum. In her book on political emotions, she puts forward this idea that love and compassion should play a central role in a democratic society. I don't think that love is a good candidate for democratic polity, at least not in

the way she presents it. I align with Hannah Arendt's view that love does not enable the faculty of judgement, that you cannot love and exercise justice. Instead, I think a better candidate for this is the third term of the French revolutionary motto: Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité. Fraternity represents the subtle emotion cultivated by universalist and inclusive institutions. Israel made me aware of this because it privileges one ethnic and religious community at the expense of universalism, consequently undermining the ability to foster fraternity, which, by its very nature, should extend to out-groups. This is why I am a staunch universalist.

There exists a critical left that perceives universalism as erasing particularity and culture. It views universalism as a kind of bulldozer-like worldview that flattens difference. I think it's the opposite. I believe that universalism, when put in practice, provides a framework in which diverse groups can engage with one another. It helps bring forth fraternity and fraternity for me is a subtle, almost imperceptible, emotion that enables us to perceive strangers not as enemies, but as somebody like you in his or her humanity. While this might sound very minimal and naive, I believe it holds significant value. There are political cultures which encourage enmity, in-groupness, while others encourage fraternity. Fraternity serves as a means to blur and shift the boundaries of in-groupness because we become aware of the shared humanity we possess with others.

For instance, in nineteen ninety, in the old Jewish cemetery of Carpentras, thirty-four Jewish tombs were profaned in a particularly gory way, which provoked an outcry in France. The French Minister of the Interior even flew to the site with a helicopter and denounced forcefully racism, antisemitism, and intolerance. Numerous public figures from across the political spectrum visited the site and reached out to the Jewish community. Mass demonstrations followed to protest racism and antisemitism. Perhaps most remarkable was the fact that it was the first time that a French President, François Mitterrand, participated in a demonstration. This participation, very unusual for an officiating President, was a forceful demonstration that human fraternity transcended partisan politics. Or consider the ways in which Jews and Muslims unite in Berlin to combat Islamophobia and antisemitism at the same time. It does not mean these two ideologies have the same history, but it means that two groups which are viewed as enemies can unite in their belief in a common humanity. These instances powerfully illustrate the concept of fraternity.

*Poul: Eva, what are your thoughts on Nussbaum's recent ideas about hope as essential for democracy? In her book The monarchy of fear she emphasizes religion but also art, protest movements, and the Socratic spirit as practices we should engage to cultivate democracy sustaining hope? Are there not similarities to your ideas as you also write about the role of dynamic religion?*

Eva: Hope has historically played a pivotal role in Christian faith, as articulated by figures like the apostle Paul. With the Enlightenment, hope underwent secularization. You remember that in his *Critique of pure reason*, Emmanuel Kant famously asked 'for

what may I hope?’<sup>1</sup> which he cast as one of the most fundamental questions of philosophy. ‘For what may I hope’ meant what can I rationally hope for? Hope was central to modern utopias, such as socialism and nationalism. It has been also at the cornerstone of the ideology of meritocracy: work hard and you will be rewarded. But hope is also a deeply ambivalent emotion. It possesses agency, imbues action with a forward-looking perspective and trust in the benevolence of the future. But it can also invite to a passive waiting for things to improve. I would not consider hope as a suitable candidate for sustaining democracy unless it naturally derives from genuine progress, equality, and fraternity. Hope is what feeds the industry of self-help culture, and it can become what Lauren Berlant called ‘cruel optimism’, an optimism persistently disappointed by reality but which we persist in holding and which makes us constantly strive.

*Poul: Nationalism seems to be on the rise all over the world, which could pose challenges for the idea of fraternity. Do you perceive any forces that could potentially help us recognize our common humanity?*

Eva: Well, you know, there was a moment like that in France when France won the soccer World cup in nineteen ninety eight. I don’t really follow sports, but I remember that there was this moment of great national fraternity. It didn’t last. But I think moments of fraternity are better than no moments at all. These moments can afterwards become reference points and they can break some kind of mental and emotional barrier in viewing people or groups we did not view as belonging to ours as belonging and representing France itself. This was both a nationalist and fraternal moment.

*Marcus: That makes me think about the climate crisis debate, that has the potential to unite people from left to right. However, in today’s diverse reality, we see populists downplaying or even denying the climate crisis.*

Eva: I didn’t write about it, but I think your example is completely on target because I think that the crux of populism lies in the extent to which people are willing to expand the boundaries of their group. That is why the notion of fraternity is central. Populists do not only feel threatened by minorities, but they also feel that the minority is dictating to them what that they should do, and what they are trying to do is reclaiming in-groupness. That means that I don’t have to be in solidarity with other groups; I must think of my own group first. And of course, the Covid-19 crisis highlighted these very different ways of thinking, as we found ourselves profoundly dependent on one another. We relied heavily on the working class, on immigrants working in essential roles like delivery, and on those whom society often overlooks on any given day.

For instance, In the United States, Trumpists were the ones who denied most forcefully this approach to the common good. They refused to wear masks, citing infringements on their freedom. In doing so, they rejected the basic moral principle of

---

1 Quoted in Halpin (2001)

protecting vulnerable others. So that underscores the importance of fraternity. There was a refusal rooted in the emotional, moral, political, and cognitive dimensions of in-groupness, preventing them from seeing the other as a partner in humanity.

In many ways, the Covid-19 crisis serve as a kind of preview to global disasters. I think this was the first glimpse of what a global catastrophe may look like. However, rallying everyone to acknowledge a global disaster and act in fraternity to address it remains a formidable challenge.

*Poul: Maybe our era is the new age of global disasters?*

Eva: Yes, I believe you are right. Disasters will pose the same question globally and at the national level: how much are we willing and able to extend our solidarity and fraternity to others?

But I am not a bleeding-heart leftist. Fraternity cannot be a one-way flow. What I mean by this is that I'm completely aware that there are nations like Russia or China who, similarly to Trumpists, may not prioritize global concerns like the fate of the world or climate change. I believe the question of how to handle world disasters becomes much more complicated because some nations remain profoundly trapped in the logic of war. For me, fraternity is not an ideal that should negate the recognition that some actors may exploit it manipulatively for their own interests. Fraternity is not an ideal for bleeding hearts; it's for those with open eyes.

*Poul: In my view your zeitdiagnosis has similarities with Bauman's perspective. He also stressed the role of marketization, endless desire, freedom as consumer desire, pleasure principle as king of our contemporary lives. What is most distinctive of your zeitdiagnosis?*

Eva: The central question in post-World War II philosophy revolves around the modern subject, and my work delves into this question. It was Foucault who more than anyone else put this question on the table. But I part company with Michel Foucault's in many fundamental ways. For him, modern subjectivity is formed through governmentality, that is, through institutional realms, such as the family, courts, hospitals, and prisons, along with techniques of control and population sciences like medicine and psychiatry. Processes like normalization and disciplining play a pivotal role in his perspective. Foucault's approach has generated a considerable amount of writing and research on techniques of 'subjectification', examining how modern subjects are made to develop cultural techniques to acquire and perform freedom and autonomy through self-knowledge.

However, my approach diverges from Foucault's in at least two significant ways. First, Foucault neglected the economy in his analysis because discursivity had to make a clean break with materialism and because the will to power through knowledge was altogether a different way of exerting power than through ordinary economic self-interests. For him, capitalism was yet another arena for the deployment of disciplining processes and techniques. Consequently, he underestimated the ways in which forms of knowledge and techniques of bio-power directly stem from and be directly instru-

mental to the market. Second, Foucault's method was overall rather uninterested in the self as the locus of desires, volition, and emotions. Viewing the self as a crisscrossing of signs and discourses, Foucault simply did not take seriously the volitional and hermeneutic character of the self and ignored what I would call its cultural and emotional architecture of the self. By ignoring the powerful logic of markets and corporations on the one hand and the cultural thickness of the self on the other, Foucault elided a vast and uncharted continent, that of capitalist subjectivity.

For the past twenty five years, my research agenda has roughly focused on the question of what capitalist subjectivity is – and mostly on how the emotional self was transformed because of the economization of social life. This question has become even more urgent since neoliberalism entails a very specific extension of the economy across all of society.

It's essential to acknowledge that the economic realm increasingly shapes other social spheres, compelling them and individuals acting in them to align with what I may roughly call the logic of capitalism. But such logic, it must be clear, is multifaceted. Capitalism contains multiple logics: the logic of commodification (transforming an ever increasing number of services and objects into commodities exchanged for money), the logic of marketing (figuring out which commodities to sell to whom and how), the logic of advertising (creating and focusing attention), the logic of branding (making commodities singular and personal), the logic of quantification (introducing metrics in order to make production and consumption more efficient), the logic of standardization (producing according to standards), and the logic of obsolescence and innovation (innovation based on destruction).

All these logics constitute different logics of capitalism – that is, different ways of thinking about subjects, objects, and relationships between them. Amid these multiple logics, one key aspect stands out and constitutes the crux of my analysis: the logic of emotionalization of the self. We are increasingly retreating within ourselves, becoming emotional actors for numerous economic entities such as advertisers, marketers, and the designers of the internet. The subject and her emotions have become the site from which and to which the economy flows. In other words, the self is the target of economic production and consumption and is the site for the performative enactment of capitalist ideologies, modes of thinking, acting, and feeling. It is not only knowledge and information that define contemporary capitalism, but the production of subjectivity centered on desire and emotions. The self itself – its interiority, emotionality, desires – has evolved into a hub to produce economic value. This entails moral ideals being articulated and benefits being generated. In that sense, we can no longer separate the intensification of *one's rapport a soi* and the ways in which the relationship of the self to itself produces economic flows and circulates within them. In my quest to understand capitalist subjectivity, this is precisely what I aim to explore: how subjectivity engenders economic value and vice versa how economic value shapes subjectivity. It is the profoundly self-constituting nature of economic subjectivity that is at the heart of capitalist subjectivity and constitutes the backbone of my work.

*June 12, 2023*

## References

- Bell, D. (1976) *The cultural contradictions of capitalism*. New York: Basic Books.
- Berlant, L. (2011) *Cruel optimism*. London: Duke University Press
- Bhabha, H. (1994) *The location of culture*. London: Routledge.
- Brady, W. J., Wills, J. A., Jost, J. T., Tucker, J. A., & J. J. Van Bavel (2017) Emotion shapes the diffusion of moralized content in social networks, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 114 (28):7313–7318. <http://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1618923114>
- Durkheim, E. (1915) *The elementary forms of religious life*. George Allen & Unwin Ltd.
- Engdahl, E. (2020) Capitalist society as an analysand: an interview with Eva Illouz, *Emotions and Society*, 2 (1):13–20. <http://doi.org/10.1332/204378920X15784918589019>
- Haidt, J. & T. Rose-Stockwell (2019) The dark psychology of social networks. Why it feels like everything is going haywire. *The Atlantic* (December).
- Halpin, D. (2001) The nature of hope and its significance for education, *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 49 (4):392–410. <http://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8527.t01-1-00184>
- Hermansson, K. (2023) Emotional expressions in the Swedish discourse on crime: A comparison of the 2018 Moderate and Social Democratic election campaigns, *Sociologisk Forskning*, 60 (1):33–55. <https://doi.org/10.37062/sf.60.24779>
- Illouz, E. (1997) *Consuming the romantic utopia: Love and the cultural contradictions of capitalism*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Illouz, E. (2007) *Cold intimacies: The making of emotional capitalism*. Oxford: Polity Press.
- Illouz, E. (2012) *Why love hurts: A sociological explanation*. Oxford: Polity Press.
- Illouz, E. (2019) *The end of love: A sociology of negative relations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Illouz, E. (2023) *The emotional life of populism: How fear, disgust, resentment, and love undermine democracy*. Oxford: Polity Press.
- Kahneman, D. (2011) *Thinking, fast and slow*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Le Bon, G. (1895) *The crowd: A study of the popular mind*. London: Transaction.
- Markovits, D. (2019) *The meritocracy trap: How America's foundational myth feeds inequality, dismantles the middle class, and devours the elite*. New York: Penguin Press.
- Nussbaum, M. (2015) *Political emotions. Why love matters for justice*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Nussbaum, M. (2018) *The monarchy of fear*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Pew Research Centre. (2017) Critical posts get more likes, comments, and shares than other posts. [https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2017/02/23/partisan-conflict-and-congressional-outreach/pdl-02-23-17\\_antipathy-new-00-02/](https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2017/02/23/partisan-conflict-and-congressional-outreach/pdl-02-23-17_antipathy-new-00-02/)
- Poder, P. (2022) The end of contemporary love life?, *Emotions and Society*, 5 (1):100–119. <http://doi.org/10.1332/263169021X16528868423539>
- Tarde, G. (1969) *On communication and social influence: Selected papers*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

## **Authors**

*Poul Poder* is Associate Professor at the Department of Sociology, University of Copenhagen.

Øster Farimagsgade 5, 1353 København K. DK

pp@soc.ku.dk

*Marcus Persson* is Associate professor at the Institution of Behavioral Sciences, Linköping University.