

Chapter 2

Retrospective: Moral Outrage or Moral Amnesia?

The July/August 1988 issue of *Z Magazine* contained an article called the “Execution Class” that emerged from a classroom experiment in which I attempted to focus directly on the issue of empathy. It’s my sense that if the reader simply substitutes some new enemy for the Red Menace cited in the piece, perhaps the conveniently amorphous and therefore catch-all “war on terrorism,” the article retains a dismaying applicability.

With the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1993, the US national security managers experienced a short but, for them, terrifying enemy vacuum. During the ensuing eight years, various “threats” were trotted out as adversaries to rationalize maintaining the US empire and various complementary domestic policies. Today, the fear of terrorism fills the bill, and the annual budget for “protecting” us has surpassed \$1.2 trillion, despite the fact that since 9/11, only 20 Americans have died from anything resembling a terror attack within the United States. This number is just slightly above Americans killed by sharks over the same period and below any other conceivable danger to US citizens.* Here is the article from 1988:

The Execution Class

Pundits have announced the death of the Age of Greed, but either the word has yet to filter down to college students or, with apologies to Mark Twain, perhaps the rumors are exaggerated. I teach courses on International Political Economy at a small liberal arts college in eastern Pennsylvania. A major challenge in my teaching has been to acquaint students with a radical critique of global capitalism. Essentially

* Tom Englehardt, “100% Scared: How the National Security Complex Grows Our Terrorism Fears,” TomDispatch.com. http://www.tomdispatch.com/post/175402/tomgram%2FA_englehardt%2F. There are several excellent books documenting this fear-mongering policy. A good place to start reading is Tom Englehardt’s masterful account, *The American Way of War: How Bush’s Wars Became Obama’s Wars* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2010).

this has meant confronting their accumulation of fables, illusions, and deceptions while offering an alternative interpretation of reality. I have assumed that, given a fair hearing, true ideas could drive out untrue ideas, and only lack of exposure to alternatives has allowed mindless orthodoxy to prevail. If this demystification process works, that is, if the arguments are found compelling, many of the students will combine this nascent analysis with a reawakened sense of compassion toward other humans—even ones in faraway places. This, in turn, will prompt a search for additional confirmation, leading ultimately to altered consciousness and behavior.

Some recent classroom experiences raised doubts in my mind about this assumed connection between new insights on the one hand and altered behavior on the other. I will attempt to illustrate this point with an example drawn from one of my courses. International Politics is a popular introductory course drawing some 80–85 students. An informal atmosphere prevails, and frequently a dozen students will offer comments on a given subject. I might add that students have indicated (in course evaluations) that they feel comfortable disagreeing with my approach without fear of penalty, either in grading or classroom intimidation.

Eight weeks into the course, the students have been exposed to a comprehensive critique of US policy in the Third World. This entails substantiating the claim that the United States sponsors wholesale terrorism around the globe on behalf of maintaining the empire. Terrorism has an address. We include taped interviews and graphic films depicting some of the more grotesque consequences of this policy. The students become familiar with the literature on structural violence, using data on life expectancy, infant mortality, and malnutrition. Structural violence is the less obvious but numerically higher price of imperialism. I attempt to establish a virtually irrefutable link between these horrendous outcomes and the normal functioning of transnational capitalism. Finally, the bogus invocation of fighting “communism” and the so-called Soviet Threat as justifications for these policies is treated at length.

Last term, in an effort to determine how the material was being received, I requested short papers on the topic, “Personal Moral Responsibility and the Human Consequences of the Global Division of Labor.” In reading the essays I found, perhaps predictably, that all but eight expressed strong disapproval of US policy. Many chose the word “immoral” as they cited the need for drastic change.

Before returning the papers, I read aloud (with permission) one of the eight dissenting papers. An “Ode to Greed” worthy of William Safire or Gordon Gekko’s speech in the film *Wall Street*, this particular essay revealed a total liberation from social conscience. Then, as a check, I asked the class to write down (anonymously) how they felt about the sentiments just verbalized. To my chagrin, three quarters of the responses expressed concurrence with this paper, totally contradicting their earlier essays. When I pointed this out, and after some prodding and awkward moments, their true feelings emerged.

They acknowledged trying to “please the teacher” in their earlier papers, sensing this would be the more “acceptable” response. I’m quite familiar with this reflexive chameleon-like survival behavior, but I had expected my class to be an exception. I expressed my disappointment openly while I also thanked them for now sharing their feelings with me. But whatever comfort I might have taken from this moment of candor was negated by what followed, an exchange that left me shaken and disheartened.

It is worth noting that in the ensuing discussion there was little resistance to our eight-week dissection of global capitalism. A few halfhearted objections were thrown up, but in a devil's advocate style, searching for more information. In contrast to 7–10 years ago, there was virtual agreement on the validity (or at least plausibility) of the radical explanation. Several students even remarked that, although the course was their first systematic exposure to this approach, it confirmed what they'd long suspected and perhaps feared. But the overwhelming class sentiment was captured by an "A" student who said, "I know what is going on is really bad. But I want a Mercedes 450SL someday and all the designer clothes I can afford. I have the uneasy feeling that if there is too much justice and equality in the world, the good life won't be there for me in the future." From the last row another "good" student chimed in: "I really have to agree with Bill. I came to college so I could be rich in the future. If our government didn't do terrible things it might not work out for me. I know it sounds awful, but that's the way it is...." Surveying the room, I detected visible relief as this seemingly pervasive anxiety was finally given voice. Taking courage from the earlier speakers, another added, "This discussion is irrelevant. We can't think about morality and things like that. And if the students in this room were honest, they'd admit it too."

Only a few students attempted rebuttals (one expressed outrage at her classmates), and I resisted the temptation to speak. In my demoralized condition, I might well have uttered an instantly regrettable comment, thereby permanently undermining my teaching effectiveness—even as I now doubted that effectiveness. My sense of despair was heightened by the knowledge that the remainder of the course would be devoted to fleshing out and defending the radical critique, the essentials of which offered no problems for them. It all seemed pointless.

On the following Monday (after an agonizing weekend), I briefly reviewed our previous discussion and then proceeded with what could be characterized as pedagogical chutzpah but was really an act of sheer desperation. By secret prearrangement I asked one of the few African students in class (Dan from Zaire) to come down to the front of the room and occupy a stool facing the class. I encouraged the class to imagine that we were visiting a Pretoria classroom and that Dan had been tortured, convicted, and sentenced for the crime of opposing apartheid. He would be executed in fifteen minutes. In his remaining time on earth, I asked them to tell him in their own words why he was going to die—that is, why it was necessary that he die. I reminded them of Friday's discussion and encouraged them to tell Dan about the cars, diamonds, gold, and access to upscale lifestyles that might be disrupted if his movement succeeded.

Adopting an animated Phil Donahue style, I moved up into the auditorium, insisting they at least have the integrity to offer a statement to Dan. As often occurs in simulations, the classroom soon became a South African courtroom. Many students were obviously uncomfortable with this turn of events, and tensions mounted. Not knowing where this would lead, I was acutely aware of my own queasiness and rapid pulse. Finally, one student looked directly at Dan and said, "Dan, you should have known the consequences of opposing the system. Now, you pay the price." When I pressed him, he added, "I'm really sorry. I like you. But if your organization prevails, I won't have what I need in my country." Another offered this observation: "You see, if our government didn't cooperate in killing people like you, our corporations would lose their cheap labor, raw materials, and profits. We would suffer

and, besides, someone has to be on top.” There were several variations of this theme, except the one student who said, “I don’t want Dan to die. This is really bad and I refuse to go along with it.” I ignored her.

I announced it was time to carry out the sentence. I drew a pistol from inside my jacket (a facsimile 0.38 that fired blanks) and asked for volunteers. The sight of the gun seemed to jar everyone. Genuine consternation registered on their faces as I prowled the aisles, offering the weapon first to one, then another, taunting them to action. It seemed to me that the implications of their beliefs began to dawn on them, perhaps for the first time.

I derided them for not having the guts to do the deed themselves. Finally, a management major accepted my offer, but only on the condition that he fire from across the room so “I won’t have to see him up close....” I refused and announced that I would perform the execution for them. My only stipulation would be that they turn in their seats and face the rear wall until it was over—perhaps as they do in real life. A few protested; the rest obeyed. One student pleaded with her classmates, “Don’t let him do it! Don’t!”

After what seemed an interminable silence, broken only by a few muffled sobs, I fired. Inside the auditorium the sound was deafening, and as Dan toppled over I announced that the class was dismissed. A half-dozen students remained in their seats, staring into space and absorbed in thought, while the remainder slowly departed, minus the usual post-class chatter. I noticed that I was trembling as I contemplated the wisdom of this experiment.

For the rest of the day, students drifted into my office and most seemed slightly stunned. Many echoed the student who haltingly told me, “I know it was a game, but until today’s class ... I don’t know ... it all seemed so abstract, so academic, like all my classes. Until I saw Dan sitting there and I had to face him I never thought about real people dying. Dan is real to me.” Other students told me they went searching for Dan after class to apologize and to try to explain what happened.

Later I learned that the “execution” was the subject of late-night bull sessions. Some expanded into debates about the morality of arming the Contras, recent events in Haiti, and the purpose of a college education. The aforementioned office scene was repeated throughout the week. Subsequent class periods proved to be the best in my memory as the material assumed new meaning for many students. It was only at this point in the course that we enumerated the considerable domestic costs of empire, costs far outweighing any presumed benefits. It seemed to me that to have had this discussion earlier would have provided an easy out in terms of the moral dilemma.

In their highly positive course evaluations, several participants observed that the “execution class” was the single most meaningful event in their entire college experience—one they would never forget or stop pondering. From my point of view, it would be difficult to replicate this occurrence without cheapening it. And it’s easy to be cynical about the more gimmicky aspects.

What it established for me is that radical teachers cannot assume that an awakening from moral amnesia will be triggered automatically by mere exposure to radical approaches. We must find ways, perhaps outrageous and risky ways, of joining concrete analysis of the world with the badly undernourished capacities for empathy and compassion existing in our students.

Postscript 2012

Cultivating empathetic engagement through education remains a poorly understood enterprise. College students may hear the “cry of the people,” but the moral sound waves are muted as they pass through powerful cultural baffles. It seems fair to say to conclude that “While they may be models of compassion and generosity to those in their immediate circles, many of our students today have a blind spot for their responsibilities in the socio-political order. In the traditional vocabulary they are strong on charity but weak on justice.”¹

The philosopher Martha Nussbaum defends American liberal education’s record at cultivating an empathic imagination. She claims that understanding the lives of strangers and achieving cosmopolitan global citizenship can be realized through the literary form.² There is no research to substantiate this optimism, and my own take on empathy-enhancing practices within US colleges and universities is considerably less sanguine. Nussbaum’s episodic examples of stepping into the mental shoes of other people are rarely accompanied by plausible answers as why these people may be lacking shoes—or decent jobs, minimum healthcare, and long-life expectancy. The space within educational settings has been egregiously underutilized, in part, because we don’t know enough about propitious interstices where critical pedagogy could make a difference.

And let’s not mince words here. How frequently are classrooms (especially in economics) the setting where questions are raised about the possible incompatibility between various economic systems and the lived expression of moral sentiments like empathy? That’s another way of suggesting that the “character” of the teacher being mirrored may be at least as important as the message. In part, this dearth of moral examination is what’s been described as the “null curriculum,” the questions never posed throughout the duration of one’s educational experience and exemplifies how limited prior experiences can affect one’s emotional response.

Further, the appealing common sense belief that students will become more empathic as a result of novel reading is simply not supported by any evidence. In her recent study on the origins of human rights, the eminent historian Lynn Hunt asserts that certain eighteenth-century novels were an important factor in expanding a sense of psychological identification with others, what she terms an “imagined empathy.” This was because “For human rights to become self-evident, ordinary people had to have new kinds of understanding that came from new kinds of feelings.”³

This wishful thinking has been subjected to an exhaustive and withering critique in the book, *Empathy and the Novel*. Suzanne Keen makes a convincing case that empathy for fictional lives does not necessarily translate into prosocial behavior in the real world. She writes, “Readers, which is to say living people, bring empathy to the novel, and they alone....”⁴ Keen lists disposition, context, knowledge, and experience as factors influencing the outcome. It may not be easy to disentangle the connection, but the political economy of our meta-culture strongly influences what readers “bring” to the novel, throwing into sharp relief the challenge for teachers.

In any event, the reader will judge whether my in-class simulation was essential, ill-advised, or reckless and whether the key points remain applicable today.

Lamentably, I suspect they still are and perhaps with more force, even twenty-five years later. That’s because after unrelenting exposure to the Gekkoisation of our culture, it’s not surprising to learn that today’s college students are 40% lower in empathy than their 1970s counterparts.⁵

What’s striking about the results is that the survey respondents could easily have made themselves appear more compassionate but chose not to do so. Here are a few sample statements from the survey:

4. Other people’s misfortunes do not usually disturb me a great deal

Does not describe me very well			Describes me very well	
0	0	0	0	0

6. I am often quite touched by things that I see happen

Does not describe me very well			Describes me very well	
0	0	0	0	0

15. To what extent does the following statement describe you: “I am an empathetic person.”

Does not describe me very well			Describes me very well	
0	0	0	0	0

In this case, “empathic concern” is defined as the ability to imagine others’ points of view. The reference above is to the famous speech by Gordon Gekko in Oliver Stone’s film *Wall Street* where he pronounces, “The point is, ladies and gentlemen, that greed—for lack of better word is good. Greed is right. Greed works. Greed clarifies, cuts through, and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit. Greed in all its forms, greed for life, for money, for love, knowledge, has marketed the upward surge of mankind. And greed, you mark my word, will not only save Teldar Paper, but that other malfunctioning corporation called the U.S.A.”**

Today’s students are the legacy of neoliberalism (see Chaps. 3 and 4); the capitalist system’s ideology of unfettered greed and the accompanying decline in empathetic attitudes is especially notable since 2000, and today almost 75% of students rank themselves as less empathetic than students of three decades ago. It’s impossible to escape the conclusion that certain elements within the culture can even override hardwired traits.⁶

**In the film’s aftermath, Michael Douglas, who played the sleezy Gordon Gekko, was perplexed by the hearty handshakes and high fives that routinely greeted him when strolling around lower Manhattan. Douglas remarked, “I’m a criminal in the movie. Don’t they realize that?” *The New York Times*, 2/28/12

Notably, a recent study from the University of California, Berkeley, found that the higher a college student's socioeconomic status, the lower their empathy and compassion scores. The researchers took pains to clarify that their study this didn't measure *capacity* for empathy but may indicate a relative lack of exposure to the suffering of others. Jennifer Stellar, the leader researcher, suggested that "They may just not be as adept at recognizing the cues and signals of suffering because they haven't had to deal with as many obstacles in their lives."⁷

However, it's far from my intent to single out undergraduates. As we'll see, in education specialist Henry Giroux's apt phrase, the dominant culture has become the "public pedagogy" that anesthetizes feelings of social solidarity across the population. It has "become an all-encompassing cultural horizon for producing market identities, values and practices."⁸

But there may be less reason for despair than one might assume from these findings. The discoveries from neuroscience cited in the previous section offer reasons for cautious optimism, especially if combined with moral responsibility and political will.

Notes

1. O. Williams, in D. Johnson (ed.) *Justice and Peace Education* (New York: Orbis, 1986), p. 143.
2. Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).
3. Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), p. 34.
4. Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Suzanne Keen, "Novel Readers and the Empathic Angels of our Nature," February, 2012. http://www.academia.edu/Suzannekeen/talks/73313/Novel_Reader_and_the_empathic_angels_nature.
5. Sarah Konrath, E.H. O'Brien, and C. Hsing, "Changes in Dispositional Empathy in American College Students Over Time: A Meta-analysis," *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 15: pp. 180–198. Konrath and colleagues analyzed the results of 72 different studies of American college students over the period 1979–2009. The study did not address or offer any definitive conclusions about why this decrease in empathy occurred. Konrath found some room for optimism in that "if empathy can decline, then certainly it can rise again." And see, John D. Bone, "The Credit Card Crunch, Neo-liberalism, Financialization and the Gekkoisation of Society," <http://www.socreon.org.uk/142/11.html>.
6. Jamil Zaki, "What, Me Care? Young Are Less Empathetic," *Scientific American*, January 11, 2011.
7. Jennifer Stellar, et al. "Class and Compassion," *Emotion*, December 12, 2011.
8. Henry Giroux, *Against the Terror of Neoliberalism* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2008), p. 113. The height of the empathy bar in the United States was succinctly described by German Green Party official Joschka Fischer in his recent observation that "...even in the United States you have a sort of welfare state, even if you don't want to admit it—you don't allow people to die on the street." *The New York Times*, July 1, 2012.



<http://www.springer.com/978-1-4614-6117-3>

Empathy Imperiled
Capitalism, Culture, and the Brain
Olson, G.
2013, X, 110 p.,
ISBN: 978-1-4614-6117-3