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Emotional politics (Den Haag, January 24, 2019)

Many observers of current politics, be it in the US or in Europe, in Germany or in the Netherlands, comment on what they see as an increasing emotionalization of politics. They point to pictures like these, and they accuse populism – mostly right-wing populism – of excessively appealing to emotions. Emotions, so the argument goes, are put center stage in populist appeals, where they find a ready audience. Moreover, such emotions are mainly negative – populism is about feelings of resentment, anger, and humiliation.

These are definitely not the emotions Martha Nussbaum had in mind when she wrote her book on political emotions. Nussbaum pleaded for love and compassion as the crucial emotional glue needed for liberal democracies to flourish. In her subsequent book on *Anger and Forgiveness*, she called on citizens to refrain from rage and revenge and instead practice love and generosity. Of course, Nussbaum is not naïve. She is well aware of the politics of resentment preached by populists of all kinds. She knows how certain media prey on their audience's fears and hatred. It is exactly because she carefully watches the tides of emotional politics that she felt the urge to counter these negative emotions by appealing to our capacity to foster positive ones.

In my talk, I would like to do two things: I will first share a few more systematic ideas about the relationship between politics and emotions. Against this historical background, I will then ask how we can make sense of the recent phenomenon of emotional politics, or, as I would rather call it: the politicization of emotions.

I.

To start with: the relationship between politics and emotions is not a new subject. As far back as classical Athens, both practitioners and theoreticians of politics have had a clear grasp of how deeply the two are connected. Aristotle gave good advice on how an orator, with the use of rhetorical strategies, could lead his audience to feel certain emotions that would then prove crucial in promoting certain political ends. His advice was well taken, by Pericles in his funeral oration during the Peloponnesian War as well as, two millennia later, by Abraham Lincoln in his Gettysburg Address.

Ancient Athens and the modern United States were both classified as democracies, as political systems that depended on the “rule of the people” instead of an elite or a tyrant. People's rule demanded different strategies to persuade and mobilize support, in contrast to tyranny or absolutist regimes. Democracies depended on people's consent, and this consent had to be “engineered”, as PR specialist Edward Bernays wrote in 1947. Emotional appeals and “propaganda” served that end.

Among those emotional appeals, a major issue was and is trust – trust between those who govern and those who are governed. Beginning in the 1950s – and even more so towards the end of the twentieth century – politicians became obsessed with trust. National surveys and opinion polls regularly asked citizens if they trusted political institutions, parties, or governments. Since 1981, European Values Studies have included similar questions, and so does the World Values Survey that, from 1990 onwards, has been conducted every five years.

Its results are hotly debated among the citizens of the nations surveyed. Politicians and political scientists alike use them to analyze levels of political trust; a rising curve seems to reflect citizens' contentment and approval. When the curve falls, however, the system seems to be in trouble and politicians start looking for remedies.

In pre-democratic times, trust was not an issue. The relationship between the monarch who ruled with absolutist powers and his subjects was seen as solid and stable. This was reflected in the semantics of loyalty. Subjects owed it to the monarch simply because they were subjects and he was the king. He repaid them by protecting the country against foreign enemies as well as against internal strife and hardship. Such mutual loyalty was thought to be a given and supposedly could not be broken – until French citizens saw their king flee the country and conspire with emigrants and foreign enemies. France then became a republic and Louis Capet was guillotined in 1793.

Trust thereafter became the paradigmatic democratic emotion, in republics as well as in constitutional monarchies as they continue to exist in several European countries, among them the Netherlands. The King performed trust in his people by sharing his power; the people proclaimed their trust in the king and his government. But they did so – and do so – only for a limited period, after which they can withdraw their trust and vote a different government into power.

Trust was thus turned into a major bargaining chip. In democratic politics, people's representatives have to prove that they have earned the people's trust by keeping their promises and behaving in a way that satisfies their voters' moral and material expectations. At the same time, voters are free to hold their representatives accountable and adjust their own political preferences. At least in theory, the people and those whom they elect into parliament are bound by reciprocal trust and the proof of trustworthiness.

In practice, and from very early on, politicians try to secure the people's trust by employing various communication strategies. They respond to demands and stage themselves as approachable people who listen to citizens' needs and worries. But they also provide their own list of what constitute preferable desires and legitimate grievances. They offer semantic framings, interpretations, and solutions. The first to do so were the socialist parties that sprang up in the second half of the nineteenth century. They used two major mechanisms of persuasion: inclusion and exclusion. Inclusion meant to homogenize their political constituency by encouraging their participation in a dense web of associations, "from the cradle to the grave". They also effectively built their own media and communication networks, with a great number of dailies and weeklies, including their own publishing companies and channels of distribution.

This network of media and associations sent a strong inclusionary message to party members and their families. But it also worked with messages of exclusion: It clearly showed who the enemy was: capitalists, the government, conservatives, liberals. Both messages were charged with serious emotional content: inclusion drew upon the powerful concept of solidarity and hope [slide]; exclusion was achieved through a highly moralized image of greedy, cruel, exploitative entrepreneurs and an oppressive police state that supported them.

Socialists were not the only ones to employ such emotionally binding strategies. Catholic parties showed a similar pattern. In this country, Protestants likewise formed their own

parties, trade unions, cooperatives, associations, and educational institutions. As you know far better than I do, Dutch society, since the early twentieth century, experienced a high degree of pillarization (*verzuiling*), with separate and relatively stable milieus. They remained socially and morally apart, but they cooperated in parliament, which allowed for political compromise and consensus-seeking.

As the days of *verzuiling* came to an end in the 1960s and 1970s, parties lost their stable base – be it that of class or religion or ideology. They turned into so-called catch-all or people’s parties. In the Netherlands, Protestant and Catholic parties merged in 1980 to form the Christen-Democratisch Appèl (CDA); four years earlier, socialist and Catholic trade unions had already joined forces. In West Germany, similar developments took place right after the Second World War. The Social Democrats followed in 1959 when they dropped Marxism and the class struggle in favor of ethical appeals to humanize capitalism. This meant moving beyond the party’s old working-class base and embracing the full spectrum of potential voters.

At this point, we might ask ourselves if so-called people’s parties perform particular emotional politics different from those parties or movements that cater to their own separate constituencies. Do people’s parties find it more difficult to capture the “hearts” (and minds) of those who have little in common in terms of social or religious background and lifestyle? Can other parties that rely on relatively stable sources of support play the emotional card more readily and successfully?

As a general rule, inclusionary feelings of solidarity flourish better in close-knit milieus with a common base of reference. Exclusionary emotions are likewise easier to tap into and channel when people agree on a common enemy. In contrast, the emotional repertoire of people’s parties must by nature be more diverse and less specific. Broader ethical concerns take the place of sharp and explicit ideologies. The ability and willingness to compromise is, from the start, built into parties that try to enlist broader sections of the population. Both on the positive and on the negative end of the emotional spectrum, those parties tend to be moderate and reserved; they habitually temper down strong and passionate emotions rather than feed and fuel them.

This resonates with how the media system has operated since, roughly, the mid-twentieth century. Compared to when the era of mass media got started, newspapers have become far less politically “pillarized” or segmented. Around 1900, each group – Catholics, Protestants, Socialists, Liberals, Conservatives – read their own papers. Since the 1950s, the media landscape has become more general and less ideologically committed. The press, public radio and TV speak to broader audiences and refrain from taking political sides. Private channels, at least in Europe, have largely copied this policy.

Even the yellow press is not openly partisan. Its millions of readers have different political leanings and cannot easily be identified with one party or the other. Tabloids are particularly notorious in Britain, but continental European countries also have their share of what is called “sensational journalism”. The term itself indicates that these papers are heavily geared towards stirring up emotions. Sensational headlines in large, bold print capture readers’ attention, and visual material supports the moral message. Such tabloids are fast to distinguish between friend and foe, they present the world in black and white, and each problem finds an easy solution. Even if sales have dropped since the 1990s, they still find a mass audience, both

offline and online. Their political impact should not be underestimated: they can “make” politicians (by, for example, reporting positively and providing colorful home stories), and they can destroy them. Remember the famous quip by Matthias Döpfner, head of the Springer press empire: “Who rides the tabloid’s lift upwards, also rides it downwards. Everybody has to decide for him- or herself.”

The decision, though, is not an easy one, especially not in times of personalized politics. Those times started, roughly, in the 1960s, and mass media – not just tabloids, but also and above all illustrated magazines – lent a helping hand. John F. Kennedy features as the first politician to dive into such politics; Willy Brandt was his eager disciple. By focusing on the central candidate rather than on party programs, his person and personality occupied center stage. His looks, his family life, and his biography were of major importance, and so was his way of smiling, charming, and seducing. Emotions flowed generously in both directions. The candidate wooed the public, and the public felt acknowledged and understood by the candidate. The charismatic politician was back, and has been ever since.

In most cases, charisma is closely tied to gender – male gender, to be sure. Women in politics find it far more difficult to seduce, despite their allegedly natural proclivity to do so. Men are allowed to use emotions in many ways: they can show rage as much as tenderness, anger as much as enthusiasm. They can even put hurt feelings on display. In such cases, women would immediately be scolded as thin-skinned and overly sensitive. Whatever emotion they showed, it would be either too large or too small. May I remind you, for a moment, of Hillary Clinton’s first presidential campaign in 2008? After she had come in third in the Iowa caucus, she confessed in front of TV cameras that the experience was really hard for her. “This is very personal to me, it’s not just political”. Her broken voice and her “almost tears” obviously shifted the female vote and won her the New Hampshire primary. In the eyes of many, she had been too masculine, a kind of iron lady who was all about ambition, strategy, calculation. What befits men does not befit women, though. Nor can women afford to be overly whiny and personal because this makes them, so it seems, incapable of taking tough decisions and being strong leaders. Such presumptions, by the way, are shared by both male and female citizens. What women love about Donald Trump – his brazenness, his offensive language, his self-centeredness – they would not tolerate with Hillary Clinton or any other female politician.

Let me quickly sum up some points made about the relationship between democratic politics and emotions.

First, emotions were long ago discovered and have long since been analyzed as major factors in the political field. With the introduction of parliamentary democracy, with universal suffrage and the emergence of a political mass market during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, political passions were kindled, monitored, and “engineered” by a great many political players – parties, unions, professional interest groups, and associations with membership numbers that went into the hundreds of thousands or even millions. Emotions were functional in mobilizing internal support and allegiance. They served as glue among members as well as between leaders and the rank and file.

Second, emotions performed best in polarized and polarizing political settings. Distinguishing sharply and clearly between friends and enemies helped elicit strong emotions of belonging

and equally strong passions of aversion. Such distinction is facilitated and encouraged by social and moral segmentation.

Third, with the erosion of segmented (or pillorized) socio-moral milieus, parties reinvented themselves as people's parties. This posed a complex challenge. Programs became less important, and so did ideologies. Compromise and cooperation were writ large, and with them came the tempering of political passions.

Fourth, this trend was accompanied, but also in a way counteracted, by the rise of personalized politics in the 1960s and after. The charisma of those who aimed at political success depended largely on their ability to perform the right emotions at the right moment. It also depended on their ability to emotionally attract and engage the audience, both party members and potential voters alike.

Fifth, the media was actively complicit in the process of charisma-building (as well as in its destruction). Tabloids, above all, sought to capture readers' attention with emotionally expressive headlines and images. They also worked to stir up readers' emotions and direct them for or against a certain cause or person.

## II.

That said, where do we stand now? How can we make sense of current developments that are seemingly bringing emotions back into a heavily polarized and polarizing political landscape?

My argument here is that we are presently faced with a new phenomenon that I call the politicization of emotions. Most commentators tend to take the opposite view: they talk about the emotionalization of politics. But, as I tried to show in the first part of my talk, this is nothing new. What is new is that emotions have become a political argument in themselves. They are used not as internal glue or as a way to mobilize constituencies. They are not serving politics – they are doing politics.

In order to understand this development, we have to go back to the late 1970s and 1980s. The political scene then was structured by large people's parties. Political culture favored deliberation, compromise and expert opinion. At the same time, voting behavior became increasingly volatile as traditional political milieus fell apart. Voters changed preferences or abstained more frequently; they seemed to follow sudden moods rather than remain loyal to the party that they had voted for in the past. In the late 1980s, some observers started talking about political apathy (*Politikverdrossenheit*). Others diagnosed a tendency towards *Stimmungsdemokratie*, roughly translated as a democracy of sentiments. A growing portion of voters, in Europe and in the US, decides at the very last minute how they will cast their votes. They are thus highly susceptible to informational strategies launched by parties and media.

At the same time – we are still talking about the late 1970s and 1980s – we see new players entering the political marketplace. Frustrated with party politics, citizens organize in social movements that often cluster around single issues – nuclear power, rearmament, environmental protection, or women's rights. They share strong moral convictions, and they engage in passionate politics. Passion here is tied to personal experience (“the personal is political”), to feelings of humiliation, anger, or fear. Yet those movements also produce positive feelings like solidarity, enthusiasm, self-confidence. As a general rule, and this is

altogether new, they highly value emotions as a personal and political asset. Having strong emotions is not seen as a defect and a calamity. Instead, it is cherished as proof of authenticity and sincerity. It gives credence to one's political demands and actions, and it is seen as a source of strength.

The ennobling of emotions did not come out of the blue. It has been prepared and heralded by a therapeutic culture that, starting in the US, has quickly spread throughout West European societies since the 1970s. People young and old learned to acknowledge their emotions as the allegedly most true expression of being human and humane. They learned to trust their emotions, and they learned to work on and through them. Suppressing or hiding emotions was no longer held to be a good thing, quite to the contrary. Expressing them both liberated the individual person and society at large. At least so they said.

Emotions were thus taken to be powerful means of communication. They actively built relations between people, in positive and negative ways. Respecting and not hurting each other's feelings set the tone in personal connections, from the family to the workplace. In politics, it introduced a new emotional style that emphasized concern and affectedness (*Betroffenheit*) on the one hand, compassion and empathy on the other.

The new political language was spoken most prominently by the parties that emerged from the wave of grassroots democracy. Radical leftist groups also learned it: they use it to legitimate the war they continue to wage against capitalist gentrification and G20 summits. More recently and conspicuously, it has been adopted by right-wing populism. Party leaders constantly refer to the fears and worries of "the people". At the same time, they stage themselves as the only ones who take those worries seriously. Fear looms large in right-wing discourse: fear of globalization, of migration, of losing one's homeland, its culture and traditions to foreigners, especially to those of Muslim faith. Humiliation also has its share: ordinary people allegedly feel humiliated by elites who do not care about them (remember Hillary Clinton's quip about the "deplorables"). People from the provinces feel humiliated by cosmopolitan, English-speaking urbanites. In Germany, the East-West divide gets resuscitated when Easterners claim to suffer humiliation committed by the Westerners who took control of their country after 1990.

Merging fear and humiliation, the mix quickly turns explosive. Encouraged by their leaders' aggressive rhetoric, people feel fully justified in lashing out against those whom they fear or accuse of humiliating strategies. Their resentment against 'the elites' and the 'lying press' finds an expressive outlet and turns into rage and hatred. Amplified and magnified by social media and their respective filter bubbles, the distinction between friend and foe, between 'us' and 'them' takes on an ever sharper, more exclusionary quality. The rally cry 'We are the people' is meant to say that 'they' are not. Instead, 'they' betray the people, they manipulate the people to the delight and advantage of foreign powers.

With right-wing parties on the rise in most European countries, such emotional language poses a problem. It is not, to repeat, turning politics emotional – this is old hat and has been going on for ages. Instead, it is about politicizing emotions by turning them into political arguments, or rather statements, in and of themselves. The way you feel forms the basis of how you act politically, it feeds and directs your politics, and deliberately so. Emotions are non-negotiable. They simply exist. At least this is what they say.

Now – what is problematic about that? As we have seen, politicizing emotions can have a positive effect. Back in the 1980s, emotions mobilized people to take action, to draft their own political agenda and force the political system to engage with it. So far, so good. Comparing the ‘good old times’ with more recent developments, however, we discover both similarities and differences. As to similarities, emotions have been referred to as reflecting sincere personal experiences. They thus express deeply felt individual concerns. This lends those concerns a political urgency that asks for a valid response. Here is where things move apart.

The social movements of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century were democratic in the sense that they trusted in the principles of deliberation, agenda-setting, and cooperation. Right-wing populism (and we might add left-wing populism of the kind of Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s “La France Insoumise”) is not about cooperation and deliberation. It does not trust in or expect “the system” to respond. Instead, it rejects that very system and its rationale. In the name of democracy (i.e. people’s rule), populist parties and movements denounce democratic conventions and values (like minority rights). Their emotional set-up is not about inviting and opening political communication, but about closing it. Emotions do not build political relationships, but prevent them.

What lesson can we draw from this? In my view, the lesson should not be to denounce emotions and accuse them of contaminating the sound and noble political process. Bearing in mind the dynamic history of emotions in politics, we should rather aim at reinvigorating democratic emotions. We should passionately defend our open society against those who aim to shut it down. We should talk seriously about moral convictions and how to translate them into politics. We should relinquish the politics of “no alternative” that have ushered in what some call post-politics or post-democratic politics. We should reinvent politics as the passionate but non-violent struggle between different visions of how we want to live together, both nationally and globally.

It is not enough to sell liberal democracy as expert-based “no nonsense” politics. This is an emotional style that, in the long run, is bound to lose the hearts and minds of citizens. In its very substance, politics is about visions of the good life. Even the famous polder model of democratic cooperation allows for more than one kind of vision, and thus they have to compete with one another. The same holds true for values (that structure the good life). Any value that is not emotionally felt loses its validity.

Thus, emotions should by no means be shunned, since they are crucial for vibrant democracies. But they should not dominate political communication or be placed center stage either. As sociologist Max Weber already knew back in 1919 (at a time when political passions ran high), “hot passion” has to live alongside a “cool sense of proportion and responsibility”. Liberal democracy needs all three.