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Book Review of Gary Olson's "Empathy Imperiled: Capitalism, Culture and the Brain

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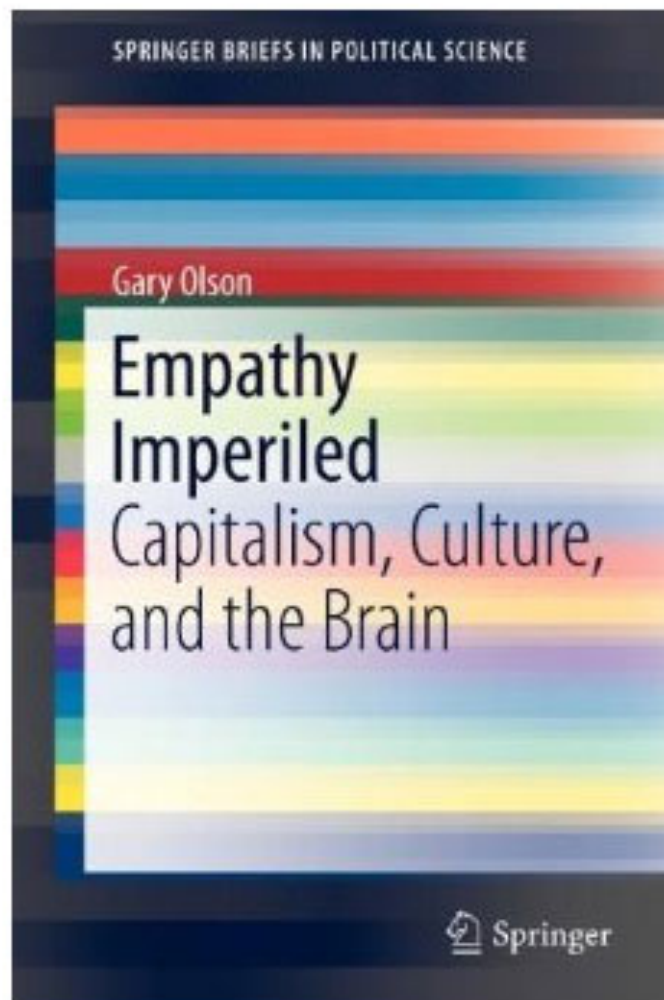
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RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

*Empathy Imperiled:
Capitalism, Culture and the Brain*
by Gary Olson

Reviewed by Kris Franklin



Empathy Imperiled: Capitalism, Culture and the Brain

by Gary Olson, (New York: Springer Science and Business Media 2013)

Gary Olson is holding out for a world of better living through empathy.

In *Empathy Imperiled: Capitalism, Culture and the Brain* he argues that understanding and studying empathy is a core mission for radical education because it ranks "among the most urgent and profoundly *political* questions of our time." Olson folds into his work contemporary understandings of empathy as multidimensional – that is, as having both cognitive and affective components and thus distinguishing it from mere pity or commiseration. To those insights he adds recent neuroscientific research that studies the ways that mirror neurons provide a foundation for compassion, citing Marco Iacoboni's assessment that human beings are "hardwired" for empathy toward others.

But wired to what end? Invoking the parable of the good Samaritan, Olson is not content to promote one-on-one assistance and call that "empathizing." He argues instead that while one-off acts of charity or interpersonal engagement might be valuable to both the helper and the helped, they remain part of a culture of rampant individualism that "virtually guarantees" that such episodes of connection will remain outliers rather than part of a larger movement toward structural change. Instead, Olson calls for what he terms a "dangerous" empathy: one that challenges – perhaps even precludes – an ideology that reinforces current power structures. In Olson's view, *real* empathy, the kind our neurology seems to have been built for, would make it all but impossible not to see the root causes of human unhappiness and work to change them. But dominant culture interferes with that process and supports current hierarchies, Olson believes, and consequently serves to impede the biological predispositions we all possess toward moral justice.

So if Olson's point is right, and we are indeed fundamentally hardwired for the kind of empathy that could lead to transformative social change, why isn't that already happening? Olson's response is that current culture "fogs the brain's empathy mirror." He points to modern capitalism, contemporary neoliberalism, militarism, and masculinity as barriers to the deep interconnectedness that he suggests science has shown humans to be evolutionarily designed for.

Whether or not your view of human nature is ultimately as optimistic as Olson's (and it is not absolutely clear whether Olson actually is this bright-eyed, or whether his invocation of a biological imperative for empathy is more of a useful rhetorical stance), he may well be correct: all of the forces he names likely do combine to uphold the status quo. Except, where does that leave us, then? How does the emerging neuroscientific approach to empathy actually help? Or, more practically, how can a radical teacher capitalize on the compassion predisposition to help students adopt a more critical stand against systemic injustice?

Here, Olson is far more opaque. His project is much better at describing the ways that dominant culture might work to tamp down social critique, or even awareness of structural violence, than it is at offering means of undoing the kinds of myopia he details. It might be fair to suggest, then, that like critical scholars everywhere, Olson finds it far easier to assay the problem than to offer solutions, and he has simply hit upon a new framework to fit his *weltschmerz* into.

But *Empathy Imperiled* does offer some glimmers of a way out, even if they are not entirely unproblematic. In Chapter 2 ["Retrospective: Moral Outrage or Moral Amnesia?"], Olson reprints and updates an article from 1988 describing a classroom experiment that many of his students found both profoundly moving and potentially troubling. He recalls having spent weeks in his International Politics course offering a comprehensive critique of U.S. policies in developing nations. After assigning a short essay, he found that most of his students easily criticized U.S. imperialism. Bringing in the few dissenting essays that supported American foreign policies, he read one of the examples in class then asked students to respond anonymously. Suddenly, 75% of them agreed with the dissenters and supported policies that they had in their earlier papers dismissed as "immoral." So what did they actually believe when they were not trying to please their teacher? It seemed on further discussion that despite their inherent contradictions most students actually held both viewpoints at the same time – they espoused views criticizing our government for using its power for political and economic advantage, but wanted at the same time to continue to reap the benefits that privilege brought.

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Olson was nonplussed. In his next class, he conducted a simulation in which an African student played a South African anti-apartheid activist (this was 1988!) who had been arrested tortured and sentenced to death for his crimes against the state. Facing execution in just 15 minutes, he had time to hear from those in the room who were willing to explain to him that he had to die. With

sufficient prompting, many students obliged: "You see, if our government didn't cooperate in killing people like you, our corporations would lose their cheap labor, raw materials, and profits." After prodding the conversation, Olson eventually declared that the hour for execution had come, drew out a starter's pistol, and asked who would shoot. Only one volunteer was willing, and only if he was far enough away not to see what he had done, so Olson said that he would perform the execution himself. Telling the shaken students to turn and face the back of the room while the act was performed, he fired a loud shot and then dismissed the class.

Olson reports that his simulation generated enormous discomfort, became the subject of countless late-night bull sessions, and prompted many to come to his office to discuss the class. Suddenly the material he was covering

had new meaning, and students for whom the discussions had been "academic" or purely theoretical were stirred to consider it in new ways.

Is this good (or at least transformative) pedagogy? Did it awaken his students' mirror neurons? Does this one example offer a paradigm for the kinds of structural critique grounded in genuine empathy that Olson is longing for? The text somewhat sidesteps those questions, but it does, at least, suggest a moral obligation to continue asking them.



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