The politics of compassion: The challenge to care for the stranger

Edward U. Murphy

London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019. ISBN: 9781786607478; £30.00 (Pbk)

Compassion, care for the stranger and the welfare of others is receiving increasing attention in social policy and civil society discussions. Edward U. Murphy’s book positively adds to this debate, providing an insightful, engaging, comprehensive and well-written overview of the challenges facing compassionate democracy. Crucially this book helpfully explores the multiple barriers and opportunities for individual and collective capacity to care for others, particularly the vulnerable; competently weaving together cross-disciplinary insights from historical, human rights, social policy, religious, psychology, political and sociological perspectives. Beautifully written and engaging throughout, it provides a cogent and stimulating analysis of both how far we have come in addressing inequality but equally how far we have to go, and the barriers we must overcome to get there.

To start, Murphy, a Lecturer in politics, public policy, and international relations at Northeastern University, draws our attention to the history of policy and human rights, which though familiar to many readers of policy history, offers new valuable insight when looked at through the lens of compassion. To pursue a more compassionate world, Murphy convincingly argues that “we need a better understanding of prevailing conceptions of justice” (p. 71). To unpick this, the reader’s attention is then focused on compassion in religion versus secularism, emphasizing the subtle but important differences across the spectrum of religiosity, from left to right-wing approaches. This is coupled with extensive, critical and in-depth discussion on theories of justice and moral obligations which, as a key theme throughout this book, help the reader to begin to understand the recent rise of right-wing populism in Europe and the US.

Another key theme in this book is the concept of “otherization” and the creation of “blatantly misleading negative stereotypes” (p. 114). Through detailed exploration of the scholarship on empathy and altruism, Murphy considers how we individually and collectively differentiate groups into “us and them” (p. 111). While Murphy identifies that most people agree that we have an obligation to care for those close to us, family, friends, our local community, etc., there is greater disagreement about who, beyond those close connections, is worthy of our sympathy, which is particularly well emphasized when considering the moral politics of liberals versus conservatives in the US. Perhaps a standout takeaway here is the convincing evidence suggesting that “political views and affiliations are only weakly based on a reasoned assessment of facts and logic” (p. 136), and thus positively influencing early experiences, cultural commitments and socio-political loyalties need greater consideration in creating more generous social policies.

In concluding the book, Murphy suggests several steps we can take to bring forth more compassionate policies, including humanizing marginalized groups to reduce and eventually eliminate stigma, educating and reaching people, especially the young, before they have cemented political and cultural commitments, and focusing on communication.
of social and political messages which convey human stories and engender trust, to name but a few. The central premise within all of this is the need to “cultivate compassion and enlarge the moral imagination through every means possible” (p. 209) in order to progress towards a politics of compassion.

While many may find current world politics discouraging, this timely book reminds us of what compassionate politics can and has achieved. Equally this book challenges the growing state of complacency concerning compassionate approaches towards social policy and welfare, particularly in the western world, and draws much attention to the Trump presidency and political upheaval in Europe caused by happenings such as the impending UK’s departure from the European Union. Although, reviewing this book in early 2021, a lot has changed in the political landscape both in the US and beyond, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the US election and the UK’s exit from the European Union, Murphy’s writing remains timely. He competently gifts the reader with the tools, knowledge and understanding to make sense of and build on a politics of compassion in a complex world, thus this should be a key text for students of social policy, academics and those seeking to understand the practice of compassion in public life.

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