

Edward U. Murphy (2018), *The Politics of Compassion: The Challenge to Care for the Stranger*, London: Rowman and Littlefield, £30.00, pp. 238, pbk.
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One of the ironies of both charities and the welfare state is that both have emerged in societies where populations are too large and dispersed for givers and receivers to know each other. The result is that such societies face the challenge of persuading the wealthy and those just getting by respectively that aiding the less fortunate is their obligation.

Edward Murphy examines the theoretical and practical issues that arise when societies that are not inclusive to begin with face the dilemma of poverty within their borders and beyond. Do the haves owe anything to the have-nots and, if so, under what circumstances and how much?

Murphy tackles this problem with a combination of historical and theoretical considerations, on the one hand, and an analysis of present-day American social values and politics, on the other. Ultimately he calls for a social democratic revamping of American society on the Norwegian or Danish model. But while he analyses the competing values within American society that might lead towards such a goal and those that prevent it, he does not present a roadmap that could take a country with a residual welfare state towards a social democratic model. In the end, this thoughtful book by an American left-liberal fascinated me as a non-American, because Murphy embodies both the strengths and the considerable weaknesses and mythologies of American mainstream liberals, including many on the left of the liberal spectrum, as they confront the shortcomings of their country.

What are the strengths? Murphy speaks as a patriotic American who thinks his country has done great things but has fallen somewhat astray. He wants to appeal to a broad range of Americans, but particularly Democrats who are unduly leery of going too far in the direction of state-directed programs and Republicans open to the view that their party has in recent years been undoing the social contract that underlay American society in the years before Ronald Reagan. His focus is on social values rather than analysis of the social structures that undergird the American political economy and of discourse within that country. Along the way, Murphy attempts to explain to his compatriots the origins and development of ideas of compassion as they can be applied to public and private policies regarding poverty and human rights. In doing so, he makes use of “neuroscience, evolutionary biology, psychology, history, religion, politics, sociology, and philosophy to explore the obstacles to a genuine politics of compassion” (p. 12). Indeed the philosophical and psychological analyses provided in this book are both diverse and well-presented. No doubt, for Americans who are thoroughly imbued with ideas of American greatness but open to ideas about patchwork changes to their society, this book is at least one that deserves plausible consideration.

The weaknesses? Murphy has bought the Kool-Aid on why the United States is a society of such great economic inequality internally and why it is so wealthy a country relative to so much else of the world. While he tries to interpret his country in a way supposedly helpful for liberal advances, he has imbibed the American school textbook view of his nation. He denies that recent American wars have been imperialist in their aims and does not explore the imperialism and colonialism that created the United States of America and explain its groundbreaking but complex revolutionary war against imperial Britain.

“Where, in your history books, do you tell of the genocide basic to this country’s birth?” implored singer Buffy Saint Marie in the 1960s. Gradually historians did explore that issue. It’s not an issue for Murphy, though he is anti-racist. The American Revolution was a disaster for Indigenous peoples who ended up on the American side of the border with the colonies that Britain managed to hold onto. The American revolutionaries tore up the Proclamation of 1763 that gave rights to Indigenous peoples that are still regarded as valid in Canadian courts.

Similarly, while he has more to say on mistreatment of African Americans, and recognizes that the origins of their problems lie in slavery, he doesn't explore how that limits the impact of supposedly liberal policies directed at Black poverty. Indeed Murphy repeats a common fallacy of the American history schoolbooks, suggesting that abolitionists changed the hearts and minds of American whites. Certainly they tried, but even as American states such as New York voted heavily for Lincoln's Republicans in 1860, they also overwhelmingly voted against giving votes to Black people and opposed all measures against racial segregation. Lincoln was not elected to "free" Black slaves but rather to forbid new states from practising slavery. That was not because abolitionists were suddenly popular but because residents of Northern states were tired of slave state senators blocking their efforts to legislate tariffs, state-subsidized railways, and free land for farmers in the "undeveloped" western territories. The "backwardness" of slavers dependent mainly on British markets for imports and exports with regards to the ambitions of Northern capitalists and farmers alike created a bitter sectional rivalry that led to the Civil War and the abolition of slavery. But there was little political appetite, post-Civil War, for giving Blacks all or any part of the lands that they had made productive or for preventing the defeated plantation aristocracy from denying the former slaves political, economic, and social rights. More recent civil liberties gains won through Black protests have not erased either the head start of whites in the United States or the racist assumptions that pervade white America.

Ignoring that history and then the history of American imperialism from the theft of Indigenous territories after the revolution to the theft of half of Mexico a few generations later to the Cold War imposition of American-friendly goon regimes in much of the world in the name of "democracy" makes Murphy's American history a fairy tale. It's difficult to propose helpful forward-looking policies when your starting point is an America that you have explained poorly.

That is not to say that nothing good has ever happened in the United States. Its trade union movement, which Murphy strangely never mentions in a book dealing with the sources of practical compassion in America, and the New Deal, which he does, do indeed deserve praise if also a critique. Similarly, Murphy does deal with the civil rights movement, the women's movement, and the LGBTQ movement, though he does not easily relate them to his study of American politics, which he tends to treat mainly as a clash of values rather than organized interests (both are important). He does mention the reactionary role of the Koch Brothers and other billionaire political players but doesn't much explain how they operate. Again his focus on the clash of values gets in the way of a discussion of how the political clash over policies plays out in the education system, the media, debates over particular policy proposals, or in political campaigns.

But while I think that the framing of this book reflects a large degree of liberal American brainwashing, I would concede that most Americans do not want to accept a Howard Zinn view of what makes their country tick. So it is certainly plausible that use of *The Politics of Compassion: The Challenge to Care for the Stranger* in classroom settings as a text to encourage students to embrace a more compassionate future for their country can play a positive role. Apart from objectively comparing various thinkers on the issue of compassion, Murphy provides thoughtful discussions of such issues as maintaining food stamps—which Donald Trump wishes to abolish—and providing universal, comprehensive health care to all Americans via a federal program. He writes accessibly, is careful to avoid *ad hominem* arguments against conservative writers, and reproduces well the arguments that liberals and conservatives have been using regarding a host of issues, from whether to accept immigrants from poor, non-white countries to whether to maintain the Americans' exceptionally harmful and blatantly racist prison-industrial complex. I do think however that his failure to explain how so

many people in America became needy in the first place is a copout. But then I am a socialist, not a liberal, and I don't think that the total avoidance of discussion of the capitalist system as it operates in America that characterizes Murphy's book provides the possibility of students understanding the difficulties of their country achieving even the limited social democratic aims that Murphy puts forward. Glossing over genocide, racism, and class injustice as fundamental to American society really does not help anyone in thinking about what needs to change in the future.

Where I would particularly draw the line on the utility of Murphy's merry sunshine historical framing is on its exploration of what the United States might do to combat global poverty. His knowledge of global history and of what the United States does in the world is extremely limited. "Poverty was the prevailing condition of the vast majority of the world's people until recently," he writes (p. 30). That's not true. For most of human history, people have lived in self-sufficient societies with sophisticated means of ensuring adequate food and shelter with lots of time left over for entertainments and religious practice. Colonial conquests by societies where inequality was fundamental to the social order have eroded our understanding of the large role played by cooperation in most human societies until relatively recent times.

That leads to his next and more destructive statement. "The best way for a country to reduce poverty is to increase economic growth." Well, then, why is there far less poverty in Cuba than Brazil when the latter has at least a slightly larger gross domestic product per capita? Why does Kerala, which is in the lower half of GDP per capita of Indian states, have social statistics that look like those of an advanced capitalist state rather than a state within India? Why did Kerala, with a population the size of Canada, suffer a negligible number of deaths during the Covid-19 epidemic while most of the rest of India reeled? The left-wing politics of Kerala are the answer, and strangely, in a book on the "politics of compassion," economic factors are overstated relative to political ones.

Murphy does point out that many poverty-stricken countries have corrupt governments. But he completely ignores the role of his government in ensuring that that will be the case: for example, in Haiti, which he names as a country where corruption hinders reform. The overthrow of the progressive Laval government of Jean-Bertrand Aristide by forces funded by the United States and Canada ended a period when significant social reforms occurred.

Murphy does mention that there are Americans who support a large-scale targeted investment in health and education in the Third World to eliminate poverty. But it is a head scratcher why anyone would think that countries that routinely overthrow decent governments because they are hostile to foreign investment and trade, destroy mixed agriculture in the Third World to replace it with monoculture, build polluting mines that destroy agricultural land, and that accept contracts to build infrastructure but share so little technical information that maintenance of that infrastructure has to continue to be out-sourced to wealthy nations, have something to offer the countries that they underdeveloped through colonialism and slavery.

So, it is within a particular American liberal Cold War framework that Murphy explores the psychology of American conservatives versus American liberals. While he favours a change of social structures, he under-analyses the structures that he would like to see changed. He does however manage to provide philosophical and practical political arguments for the United States moving in the direction of a more social democratic nation and to use those critiques to attempt carefully to refute the arguments of conservatives both from a moral and a practical perspective.

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