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## “BEWARE OF PITY”

### ON THE INSIDIOUS ROLE OF PITY IN PRIVATE AND PUBLIC LIFE

#### ABSTRACT

The title of this article alludes to the famous novel by Stefan Zweig *Ungeduld des Herzens* (translated into English as “Beware of Pity”). The novel illustrates the destructive role that pity plays in our private life, but, as will be argued in the article, the role of pity can be equally destructive in public life. The first part of the article has a conceptual character – the distinction is made therein between two types of pity: (1) as “the heart’s impatience (*Ungeduld des Herzens*)” to “rid itself as quickly as possible of the painful experience of being moved by another person’s suffering (Stefan Zweig, *Beware of Pity*, p. 19)”; and (2) as a mixture of contempt towards the sufferer and increased sense of one’s own power. What these two types of pity have in common is that they are self-regarding, that is, not having as its *ultimate* aim the well-being of the suffering person, and in fact preserving distance to the sufferer. This feature distinguishes them from compassion – a truly other-regarding fellow-feeling with the sufferer. The second part of the article, inspired by Zweig’s novel, will trace the negative consequences of pity in our private lives. The third part will strive, first, to reconstruct Hannah Arendt’s argumentation (presented in her book *On Revolution*) for her critical evaluation of pity as a political emotion, and secondly, to develop it in some new directions (*inter alia*, drawing on the above distinction between two types of pity, which is absent in Arendt’s analysis). Finally, it will be argued that even though in private life empathy (broadly understood) does not have to take the form of pity (it often assumes the laudable form of compassion), it is almost bound to take the form of pity in political life. If this claim is true, it means that one needs to treat with much caution the oft-made postulates of increasing the role of ‘empathy’ in public life.

**Keywords:** pity, compassion, the French Revolution, Arendt, public sphere

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The title of this article alludes to the famous novel by Stefan Zweig *Ungehduld des Herzens* (translated into English as “Beware of Pity”). The novel illustrates the destructive role that pity plays in our private lives, but, as will be argued in this article, the role of pity can be equally destructive in public life. The layout of the paper is as follows. In its first – conceptual – part it will be argued that pity can take two interrelated though different forms. The second part, inspired by Zweig’s novel, will trace the negative consequences of pity in our private lives. In the third part, an attempt will be made to reconstruct Hannah Arendt’s critical analysis (presented in her book *On Revolution*) of pity as a political emotion, and to develop this analysis in some new directions; in this context, I will draw on the distinction – made in part two – between two types of pity, which is absent in Arendt’s analysis. Finally, it will be argued that even though in private life empathy (broadly understood) does not have to take the form of pity (it often assumes the laudable form of compassion), it is very likely to transform itself into pity in political life.

## 2. TWO TYPES OF PITY

It is by no means easy to delineate clear borders between such notions as pity, compassion, empathy or sympathy. Many attempts at establishing these borders were made in the literature but no general terminological consensus has been reached. One can at best assert that most scholars are inclined to accept the point that “pity,” as opposed to compassion (sympathy), has predominantly negative connotations.<sup>1</sup> But they disagree on the exact content of the concept of pity. Accordingly, any proposed definition thereof will necessarily possess, to some extent at least (the constraint being its negative connotations) a stipulative character. In my considerations I will argue that pity has two different aspects, so that one can speak in fact about two distinct types of pity. Yet, as I will maintain, these two aspects, even if corresponding to two different psychological phenomena or mental states, do not exclude each other; as a result, they can be experienced at the same time. I will juxtapose or, rather, oppose thus understood pity to compassion (sympathy), which I take to be an unequivocally positive psychological phenomenon or mental state. Both pity and compassion have a common precondition, viz. empathy, by which I mean, in a standard fashion, a two-component (cognitive and affective) capacity to identify and understand the other people’s states of mind (“to enter into other people’s shoes”) and to react to them emotionally.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g. P. Mercer, *Sympathy and Ethics: A Study of the Relationship between Sympathy and Morality with Special Reference to Hume’s Treatise*, Oxford 1972, pp. 17-20; D.E. Cartwright, “Schopenhauer’s Compassion and Nietzsche’s Pity”, *Schopenhauer Jahrbuch*, vol. 69 (1988), pp. 557-560; D. Walton, *Appeal to Pity: Argumentum ad Misericordiam*, New York 1997, pp. 73-90.

<sup>2</sup> On these two notions, see, e.g., *The Science of Evil: On Empathy and the Origins of Cruelty*, New York 2011, pp. 10-40. They are not entirely uncontroversial, yet I discount in this paper, as irrelevant for my

In my view, pity can take two different, though not incompatible, forms (which I will call, simply, Pity 1 and Pity 2). The proposed division is not arbitrary (even though it is, of course, terminologically stipulative), because it seems to reflect the meanings we usually associate in every-day discourse with the term "pity." Now, by *Pity 1* I mean *the heart's impatience* (*Ungeduld des Herzens*) to rid itself as quickly as possible of the painful experience of being moved by another person's suffering. It is not a case of real sympathy, of feeling with the sufferer, but a way of defending yourself against someone else's pain.<sup>3</sup> Thus, a person who experiences *Pity 1* is emotionally moved by the suffering of the victim and genuinely wishes this suffering to vanish, but this wish is caused in the first place by the unpleasant feeling which the pitier experiences at the sight of the victim's suffering rather than by the real concern with his or her well-being. This explains why the pitier exhibits "the heart's impatience," that is, the willingness to eliminate the suffering immediately and by any means, without reflecting on whether this is the best way to bring relief to the victim. Thus, even though *Pity 1* may lead to helping others, its "efforts" are "clumsy."<sup>4</sup> It can be plausibly argued that this type of pity is connected with vanity: *weak natures are particularly inclined to succumb to the temptation of doing something that will make them appear strong, brave and determined.*<sup>5</sup> *Pity 2* is an even more reprehensible reaction to the other person suffering than *Pity 1*, as it combines empathy not with "impatience" but with the feeling of contempt towards the victim and with the increased sense of one's own power. Thus, a person who experiences *Pity 2* will wish (usually unconsciously) to prolong the suffering of the victim, since "the spectacle of suffering" strengthens his or her sense of power.

What these two types of pity have in common is that they are self-regarding, that is, not having as its *ultimate* aim the well-being of the suffering person; they are in fact preserving distance to the sufferer. It must be stressed, however, that this egoistic component appears in the pure form only in *Pity 2*; in *Pity 1* it is mixed up with the willingness to help the victim, although by helping the victim the pitier helps in the first place himself (by removing the unpleasant view of the suffering), and, let me once again invoke the apt phrase used by Zweig, these helping "efforts" are "clumsy." One could infer from what has been said so far that these two types of pity exhibit too many differences to be experienced by one person at the same time. But this conclusion would be erroneous: there is no contradiction in the claim that a person simultaneously experiences a (weak) fellow-feeling with the victim, the concomitant *impatient* willingness to help him or her (motivated basically by one's own distress), which is mixed up with contempt and the feeling of superiority. What is more, this combination of feelings and motivations

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purposes here, some conceptual problems they give rise to (I examine these problems at great length in my paper "On Three Types of Empathy: the Perfect, the Truncated, and the Contaminated," *Logos i Ethos*, vol. 45, no. 2 (2017), pp. 51-66.

<sup>3</sup> S. Zweig, *Beware of Pity* (*Ungeduld des Herzens*), transl. by A. Bell, London 2011 (1939), p. 242. The German term used by Zweig to refer to pity is *Mitleid*.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 310.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 326.

may be quite a frequent phenomenon (though, clearly, *how* frequent is a matter to be ascertained by empirical research).

An entirely different reaction to the suffering of the victim is exemplified by compassion (sympathy) – a genuinely other-regarding fellow-feeling with the sufferer. This general definition can be made more precise if we construct it as embracing a negation of the two crucial components of pity, viz. *the heart's impatience* (characteristic for Pity 1), and *the distance and feeling of superiority* (characteristic for Pity 2). Thus, *first*, compassion can be defined as “feeling *with* the sufferer,” which is “unsentimental but creative.” It knows its own mind, and is determined to stand by the sufferer, patiently suffering too, to the last of its strength and beyond. Only when you go all the way to the end, the bitter end, only when you have that patience, can you really help people. Only if you are ready to sacrifice yourself, only then!”<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, compassion can be dubbed, in contrast to Pity 1, “the heart’s patience,” the readiness to self-sacrifice for the sake of the victim, whom we wish to help for his or her own sake (this element of self-sacrifice is sorely missing in both Pity 1 and Pity 2). *Secondly*, compassion abolishes the distance between the two people: the victim and the witness of the victim’s suffering. The compassionate witness of the other person’s suffering *really suffers himself or herself*; as Hannah Arendt put it in the course of her insightful analysis of compassion, when one experiences this emotion one *is stricken with the suffering of someone else as though it were contagious*.<sup>7</sup> She develops this description in the following way: *For compassion, to be stricken with the suffering of someone else as though it were contagious, and pity, to be sorry without being touched in the flesh, are not only not the same, they may not even be related. Compassion, by its very nature, cannot be touched off by the sufferings of a whole class or a people, or, least of all, mankind as a whole. It cannot reach out farther than what is suffered by one person and still remain what it is supposed to be, co-suffering. Its strength hinges on the strength of passion itself, which, in contrast to reason, can comprehend only the particular, but has no notion of the general and no capacity for generalization*.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, compassion is a highly personal feeling: it can only be directed at concrete persons; it can never be felt with respect to others perceived merely as abstract entities. By contrast, pity may be directed both at concrete persons (though it never becomes truly personal – the distance is preserved) and at the multitude (an aggregate of people taken as abstract entities, e.g., at the “poor”). The compassionate person, as already mentioned, is authentically moved by the other person’s suffering – his or her own “ego” is almost completely effaced by his or her concern with the sufferer; as Arendt put it: *Compassion, in this respect not unlike love, abolishes the distance, the in-between which always exists in human intercourse, and if virtue will always be ready to assert that it is better to suffer wrong*

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 242. Zweig treats this feeling as a type of pity (*Mitleid*) but I distinguish it from pity. This is, of course, a matter of terminological differences between the German and English languages. The German *Mitleid* can be most aptly translated as ‘co-suffering,’ and as such it may assume, according to Zweig, two different forms, for which the German language does not have terms that would correspond to the English terms ‘pity’ and ‘compassion’ (or, e.g., to Polish ‘litość’ and ‘współczucie’).

<sup>7</sup> H. Arendt, *On Revolution*, London 1990, p. 86.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

than do wrong, compassion will transcend this by stating in complete and even naïve sincerity that it is easier to suffer than to see others suffer.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the most characteristic feature of compassion is some form of psychological merging of the victim and the witness of his or her suffering. Let me add that Arendt was not the first thinker to observe this feature of compassion, and, consequently, to distinguish compassion as a special variety of 'empathy'; it was described with great precision, for instance, by Thomas Aquinas in the following passage of *Summa Theologiae*: just as, properly speaking, a man does not pity himself, but suffers in himself, as when we suffer cruel treatment in ourselves, so too, in the case of those who are so closely united to us, as to be part of ourselves, such as our children or our parents, we do not pity their distress, but suffer (*dolemus*) as for our own sores.<sup>10</sup> Thus, according to Thomas Aquinas, what we feel towards those with whom we are closely connected is pain (*dolor*) similar to pain we would feel if we ourselves were in the position of victims.

Having made these conceptual distinctions, I can turn to the central question of this paper, viz. the problem of the possible consequences of pity in private and public life.

### 3. PITY IN PRIVATE LIFE

In his book *Beware of Pity*, Stefan Zweig tells the story of Anton Hofmiller, a young Austrian cavalry officer, who gets to know a local millionaire Leopold Kekesfalva and his crippled daughter, Edith. The meeting has unexpected and terrible consequences. During the ball Hofmiller asks Edith to dance, not knowing that she is crippled. When he realizes this fact, he runs away from the ball. As a result, self-esteem of the girl is deeply wounded. The officer, motivated by pity mixed with qualms of conscience, wants to make up for his blunder, but his efforts make the matters only worse. At first, due to pity, his sensitivity to others' suffering becomes sharper. He starts to visit the Kekesfalva family. But he soon realizes that what he experiences is in fact some kind of pleasure. He feels a stronger "desire to feel pity."<sup>11</sup> But at some moment he asks himself: *Do you really go to see these rich people (...) only out of sympathy, out of pity? Isn't there a good deal of vanity and self-indulgence in it as well?*<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, Edith is annoyed at the fact that people have pity on her, because she well knows, or rather feels, what their real sentiments are; she says: *you are very pleased with yourselves for so generously giving*

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 30, art. 1. In original version: "Sicut ergo misericordia non est proprie ad seipsum, sed dolor, puta cum patimur aliquid crudele in nobis; ita etiam, si sint aliquae personae ita nobis coniunctae ut sint quasi aliquid nostri, puta filii aut parentes, in eorum malis non miseremur, sed dolemus, sicut in vulneribus propriis". It should be added, though, that the translation of *misericordia* as "pity" may not be the best terminological choice ("mercy" is a more exact translation); furthermore, *misericordia* is a virtue – a desirable feature – in Aquinas's analysis; his observations therefore are not entirely compatible with Arendt's (whose aim is to distinguish compassion from empathy); but what is crucial here is that Aquinas's account of *dolor* (suffering) is very similar to Arendt's analysis of compassion.

<sup>11</sup> S. Zweig, *Beware of Pity...*, p. 96.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 97.

*up an hour or so of your time to the 'poor child'. But I don't want any sacrifices. I don't want any of you feeling in duty bound to serve me up my daily dose of your pity. I couldn't care less about your wonderful sympathy! – once and for all, I don't want pity;*<sup>13</sup> *I'd sooner die than have people pitying on me!*<sup>14</sup>

She realizes that other people are dishonest with her, telling her lies about her chances of recovery. She does not want to be pitied because, as she clearly realizes, pity entails both dishonesty and condescension. Hofmiller, moved by pity, gives false hopes also to Leopold, the father of Edith: he tells him about a new treatment (there was indeed a new treatment, offered in Switzerland, of which doctor Condor told Anton in secret, but its efficiency was very uncertain). This false hope leads to false reassurance. Thus, Hofmiller's conduct based on lying, motivated by pity, gives the Kekesfalva family a moment's betterment, but it is short-sighted: it does not look at the far-reaching consequences, as true compassion does; compassion goes in par with reason and thus sees that the condition of the ill person will worsen as soon as she understands that the promises of betterment were false. Pity is also imprudent: an agent who feels it becomes its own victim. Furthermore, it is often misconstrued as love, on the side of both the subject and object of pity. After Edith gave Anton a "fierce kiss," he realized that *she misunderstood me when I came to see her again and again, solely out of pity*.<sup>15</sup> Edith wrote him a love letter, confessing: *you also know for whose sake I want to be cured, for just one person on earth – for you, only for you!*<sup>16</sup> Anton did not suspect that the erotic desire – the desire to love and to be loved – can be experienced by a crippled woman. Pity made him blind to this possibility. This was due to the fact that the subject of pity is ultimately concentrated on himself, on his own unpleasant feelings, which he wants to get rid of. In fact, due to pity, Anton elicited Edith's love, and after he realized it, he, again due to pity, pretended to love her. He wanted to flee from the Kekesfalva family, just before Edith's planned departure for treatment to Switzerland but doctor Condor (the family counselor) forbade him to do it: he told him that *she would not survive such brutality; and because you know it, your running away would not only be weakness and cowardice, it would be base, premeditated murder*.<sup>17</sup> Edith suspected that he only pretended to love her, but he assured her father (who came to him in desperation) that he would declare love to Edith after the successful operation (he in fact did not believe in

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., pp. 111-112.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 256. One should add that her motives are in fact contradictory: at the same time she desires more pity. This paradox is well explained by Condor – the Kekesfalva family doctor: "pity, like morphine, does the sick good only at first. It is a means of helping them to feel better, but if you don't get the dose right and know where to stop it becomes a murderous poison (...) The organism (...) has a fatal and mysterious ability to adjust, and just as the nerves crave more and more morphine, the mind wants more and more pity, more in the end than anyone can give. (...) There is a point when the inevitable comes where you have to say 'No,' never mind whether patients hate you more for that final refusal than if you never helped them at all. (...) Pity must be kept well under control, or it will do more harm than any amount of indifference (ibid., p. 242-242)."

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 176.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 294.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 344.

its success). Eventually, before Edith's departure for treatment, he became engaged to her, but when she, in exultation, made some steps and was about to fall in front of him, he stepped back – his pity *disturbed and destroyed her*.<sup>18</sup> Immediately after Edith's fall on the ground, Anton ran away from the Kekesfalva house and went to the inn. There, asked by his comrades about his engagement with Edith, he denied this fact because he feared what his comrades might think about it: he was afraid that he might become the object of mockery and pity. However, qualms of conscience made him write a letter to doctor Condor telling him that he is ready to honor the engagement, go to Switzerland, and marry Edith regardless of the result of the treatment. But, due to the outbreak of the war, the letter did not reach Edith. What is worse, the soldiers told everyone that Anton denied the fact of engagement; as a result desperate Edith committed suicide. Further in the novel we learn that Anton was brave during the war because, after all these terrible events which his pity caused, death was not terrible for him.

Anton's story is an excellent – vivid and psychologically realistic – illustration of the pernicious role that pity is likely to play in private life. It also confirms several more specific observations made in section 2; for instance, the observation that Pity 1 – "the heart's impatience" – is not purely self-regarding: for Anton really wanted to help Edith, even if his "clumsy" way of helping her can be most plausibly interpreted as a more or less conscious attempt at removing his own distress. Furthermore, this readiness to help may have had something condescending in it. Thus, it would be most precise to say that the kind of pity he felt was a mixture of Pity 1 and Pity 2. This, in turn, jibes with my hypothesis that these two types of pity, though being different psychological phenomena, can be experienced simultaneously.

#### 4. PITY IN PUBLIC LIFE

In this section, I will strive to reconstruct Hannah Arendt's argumentation (presented in her book *On Revolution*) for her critical evaluation of pity as a political emotion, and to develop it in some new directions, *inter alia*, drawing on the above distinction between two types of pity, which is absent in Arendt's analysis. In the course of her analysis of the role of pity in the French Revolution, Arendt made two different claims: more specific – that *pity played an important role in it, as it was the main motivating force standing behind the revolutionaries' efforts to resolve 'the social question' (injustice in the distribution of material resources)*, and more general – that *pity is a pernicious political emotion*. I will argue that while the latter claim is a correct one, the former is rather problematic.

##### 4.1. The role of pity in the French revolution

Let me start from some quotations in which Arendt makes her first claim (one should stress that there is some confusion in her terminology: even though she uses the term

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 409.

“compassion” here, she in fact means “pity” – as she defined them and as I understand them):

*Since then [the 18<sup>th</sup> century], the passion of compassion has haunted and driven the best men of all revolutions, and the only revolution in which compassion played no role in the motivation of the actors was the American Revolution.*<sup>19</sup>

*The most powerful and perhaps the most devastating passion motivating revolutionaries, [was] the passion of compassion.*<sup>20</sup>

*To Robespierre, it was obvious that the one force which could and must unite the different classes of society into one nation was the compassion of those who did not suffer with those who were malheureux, of the higher classes with the low people.*<sup>21</sup>

The French revolutionary activists indeed undertook many actions to resolve the ‘social question’, that is, to improve the deplorable conditions of the lowest classes and to decrease social and economic inequalities. For instance: they abolished the feudal privileges (on August 4, 1789); in 1793 and 1794 they carried out in the egalitarian spirit the reform of the inheritance law, which introduced the equality of heirs, considerably widened the circle of the entitled to inheritance, curtailed the freedom of testamentary disposition;<sup>22</sup> they fought inflation by punishing speculators and fixing prices, and adopted public subsidies aimed at keeping the low price of bread; the so-called *Ventôse Decrees* proposed by Louis de Saint-Just (but eventually not implemented) on 26 February and 3 March 1794 provided the confiscation of the property of exiles and opponents of the Revolution, and their redistribution among the indigent.<sup>23</sup> Even from this very short survey of various regulations targeted at the ‘social question’ one can easily see that they had two-fold character: of immediate emergency and structural. Some of these regulations really relieved the poor, though, of course, they could not eliminate poverty entirely (aptly called the ‘leprosy inherited from the *ancien régime*’: in the pre-revolutionary France about 1/5 of the French people suffered from famine). Thus, even though some of these reforms were misguided (undermining in the long run the economy of the state), it can hardly be denied that, taken as a whole, they contributed to the equalization of the economic structure, for example, peasants received a substantial part of the land belonging before the Revolution to the church and the aristocrats. Yet, clearly, it is not my intention to dwell on the evaluation of the effectiveness of these reforms. I will be focused on *the question to what extent these reforms were propelled by the emotion of pity*.

As mentioned, Arendt claimed that this emotion was the principal motive.<sup>24</sup> However, one can easily advance alternative explanatory hypotheses. *First*, many revolutionary

<sup>19</sup> H. Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 71.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>22</sup> It was believed that testaments ruin the morality of family and give rise to various intrigues.

<sup>23</sup> See J. Baszkiewicz, *Nowy człowiek, nowy naród, nowy świat. Mitologia i rzeczywistość rewolucji francuskiej*, Warszawa 1993, p. 270.

<sup>24</sup> Though she qualified her claim by stating that: “Historically speaking, compassion became the driving force of the revolutionaries only after the Girondins had failed to produce a constitution and to establish a republican government (H. Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 75).” Thus, for instance, the decision

activists (especially Girondins and Dantonists) were often motivated by tactical reasons: their concern with the 'social question' had above all an instrumental character; they wished to safeguard the support of the masses in the fight against the enemies of the Revolution (in fact, Danton was strongly opposed to a deep egalitarian reconstruction of the society). Secondly, as regards deeper psychological motives, it is clear that these reforms *could have been just as well motivated* by the revolutionaries' moral – egalitarian – convictions. And one can hypothesize, *contra* Arendt, that they *were often motivated* by them. For, as Jan Baszkiewicz noticed: *it is difficult to question the sincerity of the intentions of such politicians as Saint-Just, Billaud-Varenne, Robespierre, Jean Bon. They wanted an egalitarian reconstruction of society as a durable guarantee of the unity, of the extinguishing of the conflicts, of public morality, of the smooth functioning of the democracy.*<sup>25</sup> In fact, during the French Revolution, two contradictory political ideals exerted a powerful influence on the activists' political outlook and on their political decisions: the attachment to the value of freedom and the attachment to the value of equality. Arguably, the tragedy of the Revolution consisted in that the latter got the upper hand,<sup>26</sup> especially when it took a strongly utopian form: that of the radical equalization, of the creation of the new man. What bears stressing in the context of my analysis is that this attachment to the value of equality *need not* be rooted in emotions: it can be, so to speak, basic and free-standing. And, arguably, more often than not, it had such character during the French Revolution. Thus, as it can be plausibly argued, the radical reforms of the French revolutionaries were above all an impatient attempt at the realization of the egalitarian utopia, of the achievement of the universal human regeneration. This feverish desire to realize the egalitarian utopia gave rise to what Jacob Talmon famously called *the totalitarian democracy*.<sup>27</sup> One can therefore say that evil which spread in the course of the French Revolution – terror, persecutions, the atmosphere of suspicion – had the 'ideological character': it was believed that equality is necessary for the attainment of virtue, moral and political progress, and the national unity. Equality was also supposed to play the integrative function: to remove social conflicts and the social disruption. Thus, the combination of normative and factual beliefs, rather than the emotion of pity, appears to have been the dominant motivational factor of the egalitarian reforms. The claim that the ideological motives were of the paramount importance for the revolutionaries is strengthened by the observation that in the course of the Revolution the 'dechristianization' policy – obviously motivated ideologically – played an important role. Furthermore, one should notice that the Revolution was to a large extent directed by those who should potentially be the objects of pity, rather than their subjects (e.g., by *sans-cullottes*).

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of the National Assembly from 4 August 1789 to abolish the feudal system would not fall under her hypothesis.

<sup>25</sup> J. Baszkiewicz, *Nowy człowiek...*, p. 271.

<sup>26</sup> As Alexis de Tocqueville famously said, "of all ideas and sentiments which prepared the Revolution, the notion and the taste of public liberty strictly speaking have been the first ones to disappear (A. de Tocqueville, *The Old Régime and the Revolution*, transl. by S. Gilbert, New York 1983, p. 159)."

<sup>27</sup> See J. Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*, New York 1952.

In fact, in his insightful and versatile analysis of the motivational forces that drove the endeavors of the revolutionaries to resolve the social question, Baszkiewicz mentions only few instances of the revolutionaries' appeal to pity<sup>28</sup> and stresses the moral or the ideological character of their argumentation (the fact that they appealed to justice) as well as the tactical reasons for adopting the egalitarian policy (the already mentioned need to gain the support of the poor and thus save the revolution from the counter-revolutionaries – the aristocracy). Furthermore, one should not underestimate the situational (non-moral or non-ideological) causes of the egalitarian policy, for example, the fact that the 1791 harvest (unlike 1789 and 1790) was meagre, as well as the fact that the revolutionary France had to wage the war with foreign powers, which generated high financial costs (covered by the printing of paper money, which exacerbated inflation) and problems with the provision of goods. All this diminished the support of the poor for the revolutionary authorities. Thus, the motive of the revolutionary self-defense became important by the start of 1793 when it became clear that the revolutionary government, if it wanted to survive and win the war with the coalition of the monarchical powers, has to devote more attention to the interests of the poor. It was precisely at this time that the first truly egalitarian projects were proposed.

All in all, it does not seem plausible to maintain that the politics of the revolutionaries was the politics of pity. This motive may have not been entirely absent, but there seem to be tenuous grounds for the claim that it played an important, let alone dominant, role in the decisions of the revolutionary activists. Thus, Arendt's first claim seems untenable. Yet, as I will argue in the next section, there is much to be said in favor of her second claim: that the emotion of pity is dangerous as a political emotion.

<sup>28</sup> For instance, in 1790, duc la Rochefoucauld-Liancourt harangued in the *Constituante* that drying up the sources of unhappiness is both a duty and "and the need of a tender heart." Robespierre, in turn, spoke, especially in his texts written before 1789, in strong and apparently sincere words about the dire situation of the poor or about the insensitivity of the rich (see J. Baszkiewicz, *Robespierre*, Wrocław 1989, p. 12). This might suggest that he was moved by emotions of pity or even compassion. Yet, on the other hand, he undoubtedly lacked pity/compassion – was pitiless – for his political opponents. In fact, it is dubious if Robespierre really felt pity for his countrymen; the suggestive opinion on him was formulated by his contemporary – and political opponent – Camille Desmoulins: "Love of country cannot exist when there is neither pity nor love for one's fellow countrymen but only a soul dried up and withered by self-adulation (Ch. Hibbert, *The French Revolution*, London 1982, p. 236)." François Buzot wrote, in turn, that "Robespierre never forgave men for the injustices he had done them, nor for the kindnesses which he had received from them, not for the talents which some of them possessed and he did not have (Ch. Hibbert, *The French Revolution...*, p. 249)." The most plausible picture of Robespierre's personality seems to be that he was above all a fanatic, who believed that "virtue" may and must be established by terror, and his fanaticism was probably motivated by his inferiority complex (before the Revolution he was just an unimportant advocate). Yet, while drawing this generally negative picture of his personality, it cannot be denied that it comprised a component of disinterestedness and readiness to self-sacrifice (see, e.g. B.M. Shapiro, "Self-Sacrifice, Self-Interest, or Self-Defense? The Constituent Assembly and the 'self-Denying Ordinance' of May 1791", *French Historical Studies*, vol. 25(4) (2002), pp. 625-656; or H. Belloc, *The French Revolution*, Milwaukee–Wisconsin 2018 [1911], pp. 49-53).

#### 4.2. The pernicious character of pity as a political emotion

In section 2, I have briefly presented Arendt's account of the basic differences between compassion and pity. I will now focus on those features of pity which make it undesirable as a political emotion. For, unlike compassion, it *can be* a political emotion. As Arendt observed, compassion, due to its strictly personal character, *remains, politically speaking, irrelevant and without consequence*.<sup>29</sup> It cannot function as a basis of political action, which requires plurality, distance, and discursive speech.<sup>30</sup> Thus, by its very nature, compassion cannot function in political life. By contrast, pity can become a political emotion, since when one feels pity one does not really suffer: pity implies a clear distinction and distance between those who suffer and those who do not. For those who feel pity, suffering becomes a kind of "spectacle": they can observe it, and speak about it (according to Arendt, pity – unlike compassion – is "loquacious") because they are themselves not suffering directly, they are lucky to be in a better situation which gives rise to the feeling of superiority. Thus, as already mentioned, pity is contaminated by the component of *superbia* inherent in it. Furthermore, pity is bound to depersonalize the sufferers, lumping *them together in an aggregate – the people* toujours malheureux, *the suffering masses*.<sup>31</sup> Accordingly, pity is an *intrinsically* reprehensible emotion and already for this reason should not guide human action. Yet this is not the only reason, because pity has also *negative consequences* if it stands behind political action. They become more clearly visible when juxtaposed with the consequences of adopting the principle of solidarity postulated by Arendt as a guide of political action. So what are these consequences?

First, the pitier, notwithstanding his declarations of concern with the poor, the unhappy, the worst-off has an interest in *not improving substantially* their situation, since pity is a pleasurable sentiment for its subject, giving him or her the sense of superiority; this emotion has therefore an in-built tendency to perpetuate and glorify its own cause – the deplorable condition of the poor or the weak. Furthermore, unlike the principle of solidarity, it is entirely blind to the interests of those who *are not* the poor or the weak. As Arendt writes: *Pity, because it is not stricken in the flesh and keeps its sentimental distance, can succeed where compassion always will fail; it can reach out to the multitude and therefore, like solidarity, enter the market-place. But pity, in contrast to solidarity, does not look upon both fortune and misfortune, the strong and the weak, with an equal eye; without the presence of misfortune, pity could not exist, and it therefore has just as much vested interest in the existence of the unhappy as thirst for power has a vested interest in the existence of the weak. Moreover, by virtue of being a sentiment, pity can be enjoyed for its own sake, and this will almost automatically lead to a glorification of its cause, which is the suffering of others*.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> H. Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 86.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. D. Degerman, "Within the Heart's Darkness: The Role of Emotions in Arendt's Political Thought", *European Journal of Political Theory*, vol. 18(2) (2019), p. 165.

<sup>31</sup> H. Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 86.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

This observation could be developed and nuanced by invoking the proposed distinction (absent in Arendt's analysis) between Pity 1 and Pity 2. Thus, what Arendt writes about pity in general, viz. that since it is a "sentiment," its experience gives as pleasure, and as such is deliberately invoked – is apt only with regard to Pity 2. Pity 1 is an unpleasant emotion, which the pitier wants to remove as quickly as possible; this "heart's impatience" may lead him or her to proposing inadequate, short-sighted solutions to the plight of the poor, but not to preserving *status quo* (only Pity 2 leads to "a glorification of its cause, which is the suffering of others"). Thus, politicians motivated by Pity 1 do not ask about the causes of suffering – whether the suffering is justified or not. They do not take into account the considerations of justice, or at best diminish their importance, for example, they are ready to bestow benefits on those who do not deserve it and refrain from inflicting punishment on the guilty. Accordingly, Pity 1, if it is separated from moral law, or rather, *since it is likely, by its very nature, to make us blind to moral law*, can lead to immoral political decisions.

Secondly, pity is apt to lead to cruelty: *Pity, taken as the spring of virtue, has proved to possess a greater capacity for cruelty than cruelty itself. 'Par pitié, par amour pour l'humanité, soyez inhumains!' – these words, taken almost at random from a petition of one of the sections of the Parisian Commune to the National Convention, are neither accidental nor extreme; they are the authentic language of pity. They are followed by a crude but nevertheless precise and very common rationalization of pity's cruelty: "Thus, the clever and helpful surgeon with his cruel and benevolent knife cuts off the gangrened limb in order to save the body of the sick man."*<sup>33</sup>

*Since the days of the French Revolution, it has been the boundlessness of their sentiments that made revolutionaries so curiously insensitive to reality in general and to the reality of persons in particular, whom they felt no compunctions in sacrificing to their 'principles,' or to the course of history, or to the cause of revolution as such.*<sup>34</sup>

Again, these remarks should be nuanced by invoking the distinction between two types of pity. Arguably, even though Pity 2 can be called "cruel in itself" it is not likely to lead to the manifestation of cruelty of which Arendt writes, because it does not motivate actions to change the *status quo*. But, precisely for this reason, Pity 2 can be aptly called "cruel." On the other hand, Pity 1 may indeed inline the pitier to apply cruel means in order to "impatiently" (as Zweig would put it) get rid of some social *malum*. In both cases the result is the same – *emotion-laden insensitivity to reality*, to use Arendt's wonderfully apt phrase.<sup>35</sup>

*Thirdly, politics based on pity is likely to engender an atmosphere of suspicion.* Arendt expressed this misgiving in the following way: *Whatever the passions and the emotions may be, and whatever their true connection with thought and reason, they certainly are located in the human heart. And not only is the human heart a place of darkness which, with certainty, no human eye can penetrate; the qualities of the heart need darkness and*

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 90.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

*protection against the light of the public to grow and to remain what they are meant to be, innermost motives which are not for public display.*<sup>36</sup>

Dan Degerman developed Arendt's insight, writing as follows: *although pity has the form of a political virtue or principle, it also contains an essential subjective component, which is confined to the darkness of the heart. This component cannot strictly be shown to others, and therefore, becomes an object of suspicion when someone attempts to demonstrate it.*<sup>37</sup> The essence of 'unemotional political motives – political principles – lies in their external expression, whereas the essence of pity and other emotions lies in the subjective experience: they are born "within the heart's darkness." The result of this feature of emotions is that their authenticity can never be established beyond a shadow of doubt. This may have deplorable consequences. The atmosphere of universal suspicion may arise, in which everyone seeks to unmask purportedly inauthentic emotions of his political opponent and to prove the authenticity of his own emotions. Since politics cannot be pursued in such circumstances, Arendt postulates that the public realm should be free from emotions.

As we can see, this last argument of Arendt, raised primarily against pity, has for Arendt a wider scope: it is directed against *all* emotions. In Arendt's view, they lead to the demise of authentic politics – their "boundlessness" ruins the political realm and freedom. Yet one cannot resist the impression that Arendt goes too far claiming that political life should be free from all types of emotions.<sup>38</sup> Her main argument for this claim – that the presence of emotions gives rise to the atmosphere of suspicion – could apply equally well (or badly) to political/moral convictions. But no one would seriously propose that moral/political convictions should play no role in political life. Yet she is assuredly right that the emotion (sentiment) of pity should be absent in political life: its *other* negative consequences can hardly be overestimated. In this section I have also argued that in her analysis of pity she conflated its two different types, but this omission is not serious one.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., pp. 95-96.

<sup>37</sup> D. Degerman, "Within the Heart's Darkness...", p. 166.

<sup>38</sup> However, it should be noticed that Arendt's overall assessment of the role of emotions in politics may be a bit more complex than presented here. For instance, in her book *On Violence* she stressed the necessity of emotions: "Rage and the violence that sometimes – not always – goes with it belongs among the 'natural' human emotions, and to cure man of them would mean nothing less than to dehumanize or emasculate him. (...) Absence of emotions neither causes nor promotes rationality. Detachment and equanimity in view of unbearable tragedy can indeed be terrifying, namely, when they are not the result of control but an evident manifestation of incomprehension. In order to respond reasonably one must first of all be moved and the opposite of emotional is not rational, whatever that may mean, but either the inability to be moved, usually a pathological phenomenon, or sentimentality, which is a perversion of feeling. Rage and violence turn irrational only when they are directed against substitutes (H. Arendt, *On Violence*, San Diego–New York–London 1970, p. 64)." This does not seem to jibe well with her view of emotions presented in *On Revolution*. Yet she also wrote in *On Violence*: "This violent reaction against hypocrisy, however justifiable in its own terms, loses its *raison d'être* when it tries to develop a strategy of its own with specific goals; it becomes 'irrational' the moment it is 'rationalized,' that is, the moment the reaction in the course of a contest turns into an action, and the hunt for suspects, accompanied by the psychological hunt for ulterior motives, begins (ibid., pp. 65-66)." This, in turn, is fully consistent with her evaluation of emotions presented in *On Revolution*.

One can easily identify those fragments of her analysis in which she seems to mean Pity 1, and those which become fully clear if it is assumed that they concern Pity 2.

## 5. CLOSING REMARKS

I have argued that pity is undesirable in private and public (political) life by pointing at this emotion's various negative consequences (the fact that it is undesirable 'in itself' is hardly controversial if one assumes its definitions proposed in Introduction).<sup>39</sup> What further conclusions can be drawn from my analysis? The first one is that, given the nature of compassion (its strictly personal character), it is possible to experience it in private life but not in public life: even if the emotion experienced in public is initially authentic compassion it *must* change into pity, because its 'object' is the multitude.<sup>40</sup> But it may change into pity also in private life. Thus, we should be attentive to any signals that compassion starts to undergo this transformation. Indeed, this kind of transformation may be a sort of natural tendency of compassion: to persevere in compassion is difficult, since, as noticed by Zweig, "in general, a long illness wears out not just the invalid but the sympathy of others – strong feelings cannot be prolonged indefinitely."<sup>41</sup> The second conclusion concerns the issue of whether Arendt was right banishing all emotions from political life. I think, as I have already mentioned, that her skepticism towards emotions as political motives went too far: it is apt, for sure, with regard to intrinsically bad emotions (e.g., hatred) or morally ambivalent ones (like pity or anger) but does not seem justifiable with incontrovertibly positive emotions (like love, gratitude, or moral indignation).

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<sup>39</sup> Due to space limitation, I will not analyze the role of pity in courts, i.e., the justifiability of the so called *argumentum ad misericordiam*. I will limit myself here to stating that I share Douglas Walton's opinion that this argument is a fallacy (a failure of relevance) at the stage of sentencing (when, in order to exonerate him, it should be shown that he is innocent, not that he deserves pity), but may be admissible at the stage of determining guilt (cf. D. Walton, *Appeal to Pity...*, p.13).

<sup>40</sup> Arendt described this process in a perspicacious way (even though, as argued, her claim that Robespierre was moved by pity, is rather untenable): "even if Robespierre had been motivated by the passion of compassion, his compassion would have become pity when he brought it out into the open where he could no longer direct it towards specific suffering and focus it on particular persons. What had perhaps been genuine passions turned into the boundlessness of an emotion that seemed to respond only too well to the boundless suffering of the multitude in their sheer overwhelming numbers. By the same token, he lost the capacity to establish and hold fast to rapports with persons in their singularity (H. Arendt, *On Revolution*, pp. 89-90)."

<sup>41</sup> S. Zweig, *Beware of Pity...*, p. 86.

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