Care and the Politics of Sentiment

ALEX TIEPI

I am Alex Tipei from the IU History Department and it is my pleasure to chair this second panel and make a few comments about our next two papers. The first, “The Power of Care: Political Pedagogy in a Post-revolutionary France” is by Robin Bates. Robin is a visiting assistant professor at Florida State University. A historian of modern France, Robin received his PhD from the University of Chicago in 2014. Our second author, Brendan Gillis defended his dissertation last month in the History Department at Indiana University. His paper is titled, “‘Give me the Man Who Thinks Cooley’: Masculine Care, Paternalism, and Reform in Britain and India, 1770-1835.” Both of these papers engage with the workshop’s theme of care through an exploration of the intersection of gender roles, sentimentality, and politics during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Robin’s paper begins by asking “if caring can make you powerful?” The answer we get at the end of his contribution is “Yes.” Robin arrives here by examining the political pedagogy of three women: Félicité de Genlis, Clary de Rémusat, and Pauline Guizot. He explains that in their work, particularly that of Madame de Genlis, the pedagogue and/or parent offers the pupil/child infinite love. This love can never be completely reciprocated, but nonetheless has to be repaid somehow. Thus, the pupil/child is indebted to the teacher/parent and their debt is paid with devotion.

This notion of caring as power, Robin tells us, had two significant political applications in post-revolutionary France. First, it could be used to solve what Robin calls the dual-power problem, or what Madame Guizot’s husband called the problem of the two Frances. Feelings of devotion, duty, and indebtedness for care received mediate the competing legitimacy of the people and the nobility. The king’s care for his subjects justifies his authority over them, so long as he continues to show the benevolent care. Second, care allows individuals to form bonds and through these bonds to learn to accept their place in society. Robin offers Madame Guizot’s didactic stories as evidence of this. In one, an unruly girl learns to accept her gender (and thereby authority and her place in the social hierarchy) thanks to the sentimental bonds that form between her and her female caretakers. She may not like the role society has assigned to her, but her desire to please those who offer care supersedes her desire to rebel. Thus, in Robin’s study of post-revolutionary France, sentiment, emotion, and devotion are used as tools to create a cohesive and hierarchical society after a period of political turmoil.

In Brendan’s paper by contrast, emotion and sentimentality are obstacles that a centralizing British state and empire has to overcome. Brendan outlines how British justices of the peace were expected to demonstrate paternal love and caring through the end of the eighteenth century. This paternalism presumed justices of the peace would be merciful and sympathetic in the exercise their functions. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, however, authors of political and religious pamphlets began to clamor for justices of the peace to act in more “manly ways.” Many writers called for them not to rely on paternal affection and caring in their work, but to approach their charges from the perspective of a utilitarian rationalism. Other authors and political leaders further argued that the local discretionary authority of magistrates needed to be curtailed.
Brendan identifies several causes for this shift. First, the anxiety created by the French Revolution impacted how British writers viewed the comportment of justices of the peace. One author that he cites, for example, argued that magistrates had to display manly fortitude in the face of such political upheaval. Second, Brendan notes how increasingly emotions were seen as something to be confined to the private sphere, whereas judges should approach their work with cold indifference. Finally, as Brendan writes, during a period of colonial expansion, the “logic of local authority was beginning to come apart at the seams.” Moreover, the East Indies Company’s tendency towards centralization conflicted with the magistrates’ tradition of local rule. Brendan concludes that the reform acts of the 1820s and 1830s codified this shift in thinking, creating a more rational, centralized, and utilitarian legal system and stripping justices of the peace of some of their discretionary functions.

What makes reading these papers side by side compelling is their conflicting analysis of the role of emotions and sentiment in politics and public life. In Robin’s piece, the texts he analyzes use these ideas to create social cohesion and solidify particular social hierarchies. Feelings like devotion and love permit the development of a unified state. By contrast, the actors in Brendan’s paper see emotion and empathy as a potential threat to state centralization and the social order. Consequently, I’d first like to ask Robin and Brendan to think about their texts in light of one another. While the French and British context obviously differed greatly, many of the actors discussed in both papers shared concerns and experiences: the upheaval of the French Revolution, the division of the public and private spheres, the centralization of the state, and maintenance of social hierarchies. Why then did writers in Britain discuss emotion and its relation to public life and politics in such a dramatically different way than their contemporaries in France did? Is it perhaps because the figures in Robin’s papers are ultimately interested in teaching individuals and groups to self-censor or self-discipline, while as magistrates Brendan’s protagonists function as an exterior force doling out punishments to others?

Next, I have a question for Robin. During the latter half of the period you discuss (so from 1815 on), a significant number of French liberals (including Pauline Guizot, François Guizot, and Charles de Rémusat) belonged to philanthropic organizations like the Société pour la morale chrétienne and the Société pour l’instruction élémentaire. These groups strove to provide care to the poor, notably through education. Members of these groups argued that caring for the poor would create bonds of affection that would help the workers accept their place in the social hierarchy. I am curious to what extent the idea of accepting one’s position as a woman in post-revolutionary France, which comes out so nicely in your analysis of Pauline Guizot’s story and de Rémusat’s dedication, differed from accepting one’s position as a member of another disenfranchised group like the poor and working classes? Or if it did all? In other words, to what extent were notions of devotion, affection, etc. used in particular ways to solidify gender roles as opposed to reaffirming the social hierarchy more broadly? To what extent is this a story about gender and to what extent is it a story about class and the rise of the bourgeois order?

Brendan, in your paper you describe a real tension between emotion and rationality. You chart a trajectory away from paternal care and emotional talk towards rationality. However, one never seems to be completely separated from the other. For instance, at one point you describe a balancing act between the two, where the author says the scales should be tipped toward rationality. So, I’d like to know to what extent the writers you
discuss saw paternal care, empathy, sentiment, and the like and rationalism, utilitarianism, etc. as mutual exclusive? Or if perhaps their works offer us a means of reconciling these two supposed opposites?