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Gary Olson

# Empathy Imperiled

Capitalism, Culture, and the Brain

 Springer

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*For Kathleen*



# Acknowledgements

Justly celebrated feminist Gloria Steinem called empathy “the most radical of human emotions.” By my reading this quote properly extends the popular metaphor about empathy as “putting oneself in another shoes and grasping what they’re feeling” to encompass a constructive pro-social *response* to this moral emotion, a response that might well provoke resistance. Why? Because if ordinary citizens took empathy more seriously, the consequences might well be *radical* and include demands for structural changes. My take suggests that a careful study and analysis of the world is required in order to act in the most efficacious manner. *Empathy Imperiled* is my small contribution toward that understanding and action.

Among those who’ve helped me along the way I’m grateful to Marco Iacoboni for the openness, patience, and insights he so generously extended to me. It was his compelling neuroscience research on how human beings are “wired for empathy,” i.e., how they understand the mental states of others, that prompted my efforts to explore the dynamic convergence of empathy, capitalism, culture, politics, and the brain. How does that interaction filter and influence how empathy is channeled? How might that understanding help us grasp how the world works and, especially, how it might work better?

Kevin Halligan, my editor and advocate at Springer Publishing, took a chance on this controversial material and for that he earned my utmost respect. Gratitude is also due to Lydia Sargent who published “The Execution Class,” my first article on empathy, in *Z Magazine* some 25 years ago, a journey culminating in this book. In recent years, Chris Spannos provided wider accessibility for my writing through the online Web site, *ZNet*. (<http://zmag.org>).

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Colleagues at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor's first Summer Institute in Cultural Neuroscience provided valuable intellectual stimulation to an eager novice in their field. While on a Fulbright-Hays fellowship to Finland in 1977, I was introduced by my hosts at the University of Turku to Johan Galtung's pioneering work on structural violence, work that's had a lifelong influence; Noam Chomsky, whose picture hangs over my desk, is referenced several times in this book. During my career there's no engaged public intellectual's life and work that has been more of a moral lodestar for me. Thank you, Noam.

On many more days than not, the gratification I obtain from interacting with my Moravian students is what keeps me going and sustains my optimism about the world's future. It's been a privilege to learn alongside them.

Some of the people mentioned above may harbor reservations about aspects of *Empathy Imperiled*. Obviously none are at fault for any remaining missteps and shortcomings. I do hope that most of them will agree that I've been conscientious in my efforts to enliven and extend both a professional and, especially, a public conversation on this "most radical of human emotions."

I thank my now-adult daughters, Alix and Elizabeth, who've always been such nonjudgmental, supportive, and loving members of my family. Finally, the dedication of this book to my life partner Kathleen Kelly is only a minute expression of my gratitude for her probing questions, for critical reading of the manuscript, and for being such an affirming presence in my life. By example, she's incalculably enhanced my appreciation for empathy's liberating potential.



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