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## **The Monarchy of Fear: A Philosopher Looks at Our Political Crisis, by Martha C. Nussbaum**

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The Monarchy of Fear: A Philosopher Looks at Our Political Crisis

By Martha C. Nussbaum

Oxford University Press, 272pp, £18.99

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The first thing to say is that this book is not what it might seem from the blurb. And that's a good thing. If you are expecting an extended diatribe against Donald Trump, with Brexit dragged in under the same umbrella, as a sign of a political crisis of previously unseen momentousness, you will be sorely disappointed. I won't insult Martha Nussbaum by pointing to the various ways in which eliding the current politics of the US and UK is misleading because, unless I blinked, she doesn't mention Brexit at all. Some responsibility must be laid at her feet, however, if she sanctioned the blurb. And also some criticism of a more substantial nature, because the wrong kind of emotionally charged tone we find in the blurb is an instance of precisely the sort of thing that impairs the good argument and good decision-making that she elucidates so well in the book.

There has been much hysteria directed at the election of Trump, with wild predictions of the global death of truth, which some academics have laid, in what can only be described as a laughable manifestation of intellectual self-aggrandisement, at the door of Jacques Derrida and deconstruction. Nussbaum is far too good a philosopher for that kind of thing.

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Her main thesis is that what lies at the heart of the crisis of politics in America is fear, which brings with it three other emotions: anger, disgust and envy. Together, these undermine the working of a democracy by wounding love, by which Nussbaum means treating others as fellow human beings. Her central ideas are not really about current politics but rather about fear as a generic threat to democracy. Indeed, when discussing anger, she says: "I think we rarely think clearly when we are thinking about ourselves and our own immediate time." She is rightly aware of the dangers of over-topicality precisely because of the way that misdirected emotion warps one's judgement. She shows this distortion and exaggeration operating on both sides of the political debate in America, but similar phenomena might of course be found in any democracy.

As Nussbaum makes clear, people have very short memories if they believe that America has declined from some golden age of political and social unity. She points to once greater racial hatred, repression of communist views, homophobia, blatant antisemitism, prevalent obstacles to women and to those with a disability. It might have been worth mentioning a few other "crises" from the near past that make the present putative ones seem like very small beer indeed, such as the 20-year slaughter of the Vietnam War, the terror and lies of the Cold War (including the near world-annihilating Cuban missile crisis) and, looking further afield, Mao Zedong's murder of 45 million people in "the Great Leap Forward" - a name that, in terms of playing fast and loose with the truth, dwarfs anything we see today.

Still, political crises come in all shapes and sizes, and Nussbaum gives an analysis of the current one that draws not only on sage thoughts from thinkers of the past, but also on historical events in the ancient world, as well as features of individual human psychology. She seeks to demonstrate that the fear and helplessness characteristic of infancy often re-emerge in adult life, as do their cousins, anger, disgust and envy. Such emotions may be turned to good or ill, and need not be innately harmful; but through misinformation, inflammatory rhetoric or social pressures may come to be so. In concentrating on emotion, Nussbaum perhaps underestimates the harmful effects of sheer lack of knowledge.

In a monarchy, it is argued, fear is directed at a supreme leader who is supposed to sort everything out. But a democracy requires the lowering of individual citizens' fears of other citizens to a level of trust necessary to allow the system to function, because what happens to one now depends on the decisions of many others. In a crude way, you have to feel that we are all in it together. If that starts to break down, it often does so by treating another group as dangerous, with the individuality of those within it effectively obscured. Thus, the Muslim in India who has lived for years in friendly cooperation with a Hindu neighbour may come to be seen as part of a wider Islamic threat. It's a curious omission in Nussbaum's book that she does not mention Thomas Hobbes, for he thought that mutual trust would be possible only in a society ruled by a monarchical leader with near absolute power. Hobbes exaggerated. But he was right that trust would not arise spontaneously in a state of nature, but only under the rule of law; he was just wrong that a democracy couldn't sustain that trust.

Nussbaum's point is that it represents a fundamental threat to democracy when you believe that others cannot be trusted to vote. Once that happens, something we see among both Trump's supporters and his critics, the outcome of the democratic process may become unacceptable to the losing side or be seen as a result of some dastardly conspiracy. It's a small step from that to questioning democracy itself as the least worst form of government.

It should be made clear that Nussbaum is not a stoic, let alone a cynic. Far from being opposed to emotion in life, both personal and public, she thinks that almost any emotion - even fear, anger and disgust - can be turned to good or bad ends (although she finds it difficult to see envy as virtuous in any circumstances). It is not the elimination of emotion from argument that she wants. And there is a good reason for this: emotions direct us to care about some things more than others. No process of pure reasoning can do this, and therefore lead us to a conclusion and to action.

The book's positive prescription for avoiding the political divisions brought about by the wrong inflamed emotions and for keeping people together in accepting democracy, even when decisions run against them, is based on love and hope. This is not a sentimental, huggy form of love; rather, it involves seeing others as equals regardless of their being different from us and having very different views (indeed, we do not even need to like them). Hope Nussbaum regards as often a self-fulfilling placebo and, along with Kant, as a

"practical postulate". Thinking and acting in a hopeful manner makes certain outcomes more likely. One might, of course, counterargue that hope too can be used for ill, as when people have their hopes raised by false promises, and when they drop their guard about the threats to what they are hoping for. Among all this high-mindedness, Nussbaum perhaps fails to value the puncturing power of humour as the shock-troop purveyor of criticism and truth. I'm also less convinced by her relatively sanguine and indeed positive attitude towards the power of religion to foster the appropriate kind of love and hope when so much division can be laid at its door. After all, if you think you know what the good life is, and doubt about that is discouraged (which undermines the emotional gumption needed to question and argue), it's very easy for this to lead to intolerance and the vilification of others.

All in all, this is a fascinating book, although a bit of an essayish ramble going from one thing to another (and it's a shame that there is no index). But, boy, does Nussbaum write well. It's incredibly readable.

John Shand is honorary associate in philosophy at the Open University.

The author

Martha Nussbaum, Ernst Freund distinguished service professor of law and ethics at the University of Chicago, studied theatre and Classics before switching to philosophy, and has described how the life of the mind helped her escape a "sterile" and status-conscious New York background. She taught at Harvard, where she faced a good deal of sexism and harassment, and then at Brown University, before moving to Chicago in 1994.

Acclaimed for

*The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*

(1986), Nussbaum has gone on to become one of the leading public intellectuals in the US, writing widely on ethics, literature, politics and sexual justice. She helped develop the "capability approach", setting out minimal conditions for human flourishing, which underpins the UN's Human Development Index. She has made major contributions to debates about education in

books such as *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*

(2010), which celebrates the traditional liberal arts ideal and savages educational trends that she sees as "producing a greedy obtuseness and a technically trained docility that threaten the very life of democracy itself". And she has reflected on what makes a good life, most recently in

*Aging Thoughtfully: Conversations about Retirement, Romance, Wrinkles, and Regret*

(with Saul Levmore, 2018).

Unlike most philosophers, Nussbaum has given emotions a central place in her work. In

*Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*

(2001), she urged moral philosophers to "grapple with the messy materials of grief and love, anger and fear".

*Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame and the Law*

(2004) explored the dangers of letting emotions influence our law-making, while

*From Disgust to Humanity: Sexual Orientation and Constitutional Law*

(2010) applied such insights to the debate on same-sex marriage. Her latest book builds on all this in addressing today's "political crisis".

Matthew Reisz

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