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Beyond Cruel Optimism: A New Type of Empathy

Not all empathy is equal. This fact seems obvious in the context of varied day-to-day interactions, but it carries significant weight when placed in the context of Jeremy Rifkin's empathic civilization model, a wide-reaching solution to a crisis. Rifkin's solution, though, suffers from significant attachment-related oversight. Without modification, the empathic civilization model unravels under the scrutiny of crucial theory like Lauren Berlant's cruel optimism. With appropriate modification, however, the empathic civilization model may provide an alternative to a harmful status quo. Though cruel optimism and the empathic civilization model approach empathy from near-opposite perspectives, the two concepts can coexist—but only if empathy, as a concept, is distanced from counterfeit, disingenuous practices commonly labeled as empathy. This requires a vivisection of empathic practices, which hyperreality can provide. Jean Baudrillard's distinction between "real" and "artificial," when both simplified and applied beyond Baudrillard's original claims, offers a framework for nuanced analysis of empathy and establishes the difficulty of distinguishing between types of empathic behavior. If an adapted version of Jean Baudrillard's hyperreality is used as a tool to help distinguish between active, earnest empathy and passive, imaginary empathy, Jeremy Rifkin's empathic civilization model can operate concurrently with Lauren Berlant's cruel optimism concept to create a worldview that both critiques the pervasive, systemically fueled misrecognitions of cruel

optimism and celebrates the instances of active, change-focused empathy that manage to break the surface of that cruelty to create a better world.

Jeremy Rifkin's empathic civilization model, as explained in *The Empathic Civilization: The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis* and fine-tuned elsewhere, assumes a multifaceted, interdisciplinary understanding of empathy—empathy is both a biological, "soft wired" response to another's distress and the "invisible hand" that connects all inhabitants of the planet—but this neurosociological approach to empathy does not, in practice, distinguish between empathic behaviors and behaviors masquerading as empathy. Rifkin frames widespread empathy as a natural phenomenon that can alleviate problems sustained, in part, by lingering Enlightenment-era perceptions of human nature, and any distinction between empathy and empathy-like or empathy-adjacent behaviors exists within this framing: mature, transformational empathy versus immature, common empathy (7-14, 42-43). Empathy-related problems, for Rifkin, exist as problems related to effectiveness, degree, purpose, and target, but not type. In Rifkin's view, less desirable empathy is simply underdeveloped empathy—empathy in need of a boost—and humanity must fully develop its empathic nature in order to address the world's environmental crisis. Near the beginning of his book, Rifkin frames empathy as a goal currently married to a problem:

> The second law of thermodynamics and entropy is a constant reminder of the nature of the struggle that animates each of our lives and that joins us together in fellowship and solidarity. . . . The tragic flaw of history is that our increased empathic concern and sensitivity grows in direct proportion to the wreaking of greater entropic damage to the world we all cohabit and rely on for our existence and perpetuation. (41-42)

Empathy, according to Rifkin, is the "social glue" that allows "increasingly complex societies" to form and grow, and those societies in turn spark "entropic losses" that may lead to "global entropic collapse" (42). In this way, Rifkin sees empathy on a global scale as both a force that has inadvertently pushed the planet toward peril and the only viable solution to the planet's current environmental crisis. Rifkin calls for human beings to reduce their consumption and fine-tune their empathic worldview, to fill "the Earth with our compassion and grace rather than our spent energy" (178). Rifkin asks humanity to become "homo empathicus," a fully realized version of humankind that is mature, affectionate, sociable, and actively locating "kindred spirits among our fellow creatures" (evidence of something that Rifkin calls "biosphere consciousness") (104). The Brobdingnagian scope of Rifkin's almost theoretical solution to environmental problems is perhaps why Medium's Lee Vinsel described Rifkin as existing on the "edge of credibility," why Peter Foster of the *Financial Post* called Rifkin a "policy entrepreneur," and why Rifkin's discussions of empathy seem to come dangerously close to the type of mawkishness that University of Chicago's Lauren Berlant dismissed as "a theatre of empathy" during an interview for the Hypocrite Reader. If Jeremy Rifkin's empathic civilization model is to survive under the scrutiny of Berlant's cruel optimism, empathic behaviors must be examined further.

Cruel optimism describes a "Sisyphean pursuit," as *The New Yorker*'s Hua Hsu calls it, that might dismiss the exceptional hopefulness of Rifkin's empathy-focused worldview (unless that worldview is further developed). In the introduction to her book, for example, Lauren Berlant comments on the flaneur and the flaneuse, stroller archetypes of Romantic origin. Berlant argues that the benefits of "the reflexive scanning" of the flaneur and the flaneuse has been corrupted; indeed, what once "provided relief" now "exemplifies the mass sensorium

engendered by problems of survival . . .” (8). Even this dissociative Romantic ideal, one that may offer an easy alternative to the utilitarian Enlightenment-era ideologies that Rifkin criticizes, has been absorbed into the “shapelessness of the present,” a sort of “precariousness” that exists amid “manifest crisis situations in ordinary existence” (10-11). For Berlant, most seemingly disruptive behaviors, events, and responses are “embedded in the ordinary” (10), and the overwhelming nature of this “regime of crisis ordinariness” transforms some (if not most) solution-oriented thinking into “desperate doggy paddling” (117). Even those who have suffered most from cruel optimism are, in Berlant’s view, cursed to “protect what optimism they have” (10), even if that optimism is harmful (meaning “cruel”). Early in his book, Rifkin attempts to wriggle free of this type of constraining logic. When Jeremy Rifkin argues that there is “little hope” for humanity unless it can access and refocus its alleged predisposition to “affection, companionship, sociability, and empathic extension”—all of which are, according to Rifkin, “more basic” than “materialist” drives that make us “self-serving, utilitarian, and pleasure-seeking”—he is arguing for an exceptional response to a global crisis (42), and he is framing the response as socio-politically overlooked instinct. In response to the sweeping nature of cruel optimism, this strange framing may, on some level, offer a theoretical loophole, but the escape is an unsatisfactory one: Rifkin’s argument assumes that *redefining* human nature will *change* human nature, which is a bold prophesy. Additionally, his “new view of human nature” seeks to highlight the sociability of living things, which contains many attachment-related claims and is particularly subject to critiques regarding misrecognition.

A more compelling method of melding Rifkin’s assertions with Berlant’s commentaries comes, in part, from Berlant herself, who acknowledges the limitations of cruel optimism.

During an interview for the IPAK Centar, posted to YouTube in 2016, Berlant distinguished between kinds of affect:

> Sentimentality is a particular thing. It's a particular way that liberal subjectivity has been trained since the 19th century, in kind of modern nations but certainly in the US, where people start to think that it would be possible if they orchestrated their empathy in the right way to include other people in it without experiencing a loss of their status. And that's a very particular kind of affect; it's not affect in general. . . . So cruel optimism is also about a very particular kind of affect. . . . That's just a different topic. It's about affect, but it's a different topic.

Assuming that—despite great efforts to shroud his "liberal subjectivity" in historical precedent—Rifkin's core arguments are fueled by sentimentality, Berlant here offers a theoretical olive branch: sentimentality can be discussed separately from cruel optimism. As noted earlier, Rifkin takes aim at Enlightenment-era philosophies and ideologies like materialism, determinism, and utilitarianism—ideas that Rifkin called "dysfunctional" and "toxic" during his lecture at the 2010 Ross Institute Summer Academy—but his true indictment targets modernity's apparent inability to move past these "old ideas about the meaning of human nature." For Rifkin, the empathic civilization concept is less of a global return to form and more a historically and neuroscientifically rooted solution to a modern crisis. Our empathic drive has always existed, but it has been corrupted, neglected, and forgotten amid the lasting popularization of the "toxic" antisocial ideologies developed during the Enlightenment. However, creating an empathic civilization requires an overhaul of our social philosophies and sociopolitical systems. Empathic behavior, then, is simultaneously behavior humanity has always subconsciously exhibited *and* an action it must consciously do now to address environmental and economic problems. Even

allowing some forms of sentimentality to exist outside the scrutiny of cruel optimism, the former idea seems inescapably intertwined in Berlant's critique of globalized capitalism, but the latter—conscious action fueled by instinct and "a very particular kind of affect"—might offer a way out of the double-bind nature of cruel optimism.

Rifkin's empathic civilization model, however, suffers from a lack of prescriptive commentary regarding conscious acts of empathy, and that oversight must be addressed. For example, Rifkin's book touts the benefits of "the global electronic public square" (427), noting specifically the social media response to the tsunamis that hit Asian and East African coastlines in December of 2004. In the book, Rifkin celebrates the "global chat room" that allowed "others to express their grief and extend their empathy to the victims and their families." Rifkin's attempt to warn readers about the dangers of "voyeuristic entertainment" and "desensitization," however, ends with a strangely noncommittal deferment: "The jury is still out on this one" (428). Throughout Rifkin's novel, best practices regarding empathic behavior are often deferred to the reader's individual discernment. Again, a need to dissect and identify types of empathic practices emerges.

Hyperreality, as described by Jean Baudrillard, has limited value in this discussion, but its basic concepts, especially as they apply to Baudrillard's analysis of Disneyland, can operate here as tools to cut empathic practices into its different types. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, his famous work on symbols and signs, Baudrillard argues that California's Disneyland is an "imaginary" that is "neither true nor false" (13). For Baudrillard, Disneyland represented a "perfect model" of hyperreality (12), operating like a "sympathetic nervous system made up of childhood signals and faked phantasms" (13). Disneyland, the "great toxic excrement of a hyperreal civilization," is not a "false representation of reality": it is an "imaginary" designed to

conceal "the fact that the real is no longer real" (12-13). On a basic level, the act of existing as a simulacrum operates like a more systemic version of philosopher and Princeton professor Harry G. Frankfurt's version of bullshit as described in his book, *On Bullshit*:

> Since bullshit need not be false, it differs from lies in its misrepresentational intent. . . . The fact about himself that the bullshitter hides . . . is that the truth-values of his statements are of no central interest to him. . . . This does not mean that his speech is anarchically impulsive, but that the motive guiding and controlling it is unconcerned with how the things about which he speaks truly are. It is impossible for someone to lie unless he thinks he knows the truth. Producing bullshit requires no such conviction. (54-55)

For Baudrillard, simulacra such as Disneyland are not copies of the "real": they are hyperreal, meaning that "the symbol, endlessly replicable and improvable, has come to replace the 'real' object or idea it once represented" (Wilson). Hyperreality is not a lie because, like bullshit, it lacks the appropriate connection to reality. It is a new truth, and it is sometimes difficult, if possible at all, to distinguish between the simulacrum and the "real" that once existed. When applied to empathy—specifically Rifkin's understanding of empathy—these basic guidelines allow for the identification of a new hyperreal type of empathy that is imaginary and symbolically linked to empathy—but without any "real" connection to empathic concern. This hyperreal empathy is a new type of empathy that operates like the "recycled waste" of empathic connection (Baudrillard 13), a symbol that neither false nor true—more bullshit than lie. This new hyperreal empathy is Disneyland empathy.

Much of Rifkin's empathic evidence is Disneyland empathy. Rifkin believes, for example, that evidence of "an 'empathic multiplier effect" exists in the "increasing inclusion of

women, homosexuals, the disabled, and other formerly outcast groups, including other species, and the proliferation of multireligious, multicultural, and multiracial dating and marriages. . .” (474). This argument overlooks possible misrecognition of inclusion—the possible cost the “good life”—and insofar as Rifkin’s assertion is political, the message’s spirit of togetherness is, to use the words of Lauren Berlant, an “object/scene of desire” founded on the value of listening and respecting that “produces a sense of shared worldness, apart from whatever aim or claim the listening public might later bring to a particular political world because of what they have heard” (224). In other words, Rifkin’s celebration of the increasing togetherness of the world may be cruel optimism. In fact, any instance of Disneyland empathy falls prey to cruel optimism. Rifkin’s hope for the “global chat room” is fueled by similar attachments (Rifkin 427); his appreciation of tourism as an empathy-generating force—“the long and short of it is that people are getting to know each other”—is a particularly simplistic form of arguably harmful attachment (439); and his assertion that a recent “rapid shift in values from rational and materialist to self-expression and quality-of-life” paves a path for meaningful empathic connection is a form of cruel optimism that consists of a variety of intermingled attachments, including political engagement and belonging (449). These forms of empathic trends are simulacra of empathy. They are the echoes of “real” empathic connection, absent authenticity and proactiveness, thus qualifying them as Disneyland empathy—and Disneyland empathy is almost always cruel optimism. Julie C. Garlena of Georgia Southern University and Jennifer A. Sandlin of Arizona State University examine the connection between Disney and cruel optimism in their article, “Happily (n)ever after: the cruel optimism of Disney’s romantic ideal.” Garlena and Sandlin argue that “the optimism of Disney’s romantic ideal is also cruel because it perpetuates social inequalities” and “narrowly define[s] our categories of being in the world.”

The hyperreal Disneyland empathy operates similarly: much of Rifkin's empathy operates within an oppressive understanding of the "good life." Rifkin's empathic civilization model is based on a fair amount of inauthentic empathy, and inauthentic, Disneyland empathy reinforces harmful attachments.

Not every act of empathy, however, is Disneyland empathy. Proactive, intuitive, transformational empathic behavior could untether circumstances from cruel optimism and energize the empathic civilization. Berlant sees intuition as "where affect meets history, in all of its chaos, normative ideology, and embodied practices discipline and invention" (52), and perhaps intuition, as it relates to affect, can "renegotiate the terms of reciprocity that contour [the] historical situation" (53). Berlant's exploration of intuition includes her analysis of Cayce Pollard, the protagonist of William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition* with "supersensitive intuition" (76-79). According to Berlant, Cayce's "singular talent for reading the trademark's potential power" is motivated by an attachment to "the potentiality of the deal" and "the potential for achieving genuine human reciprocity," which reinforces the "normativity of the techno-political game" (77). Cayce, however, can successful embody the spirit of the flaneuse: "she genuinely detaches from the defense of a cosmopolitan intuitional style so that she might actually attach to particular persons and wander with them" (78-79). Cayce Pollard, as an intuitive being, is able to wander, thus resisting, perhaps momentarily, absorption into the "shapelessness of the present." Empathy that wishes to break through the barriers of cruel optimism, in addition to being authentic and proactive, must exhibit similarly "supersensitive intuition."

Cruel optimism operates like Earth's exosphere: individuals can look past it with a telescope, but any observations about the beyond are made with feet planted in the planet's soil. The only way to move past it, then, is with a rocket, propelled by fuel and fire toward outer

space. Authentic, proactive, transformational, intuitive empathy is that rocket. Most forms of empathy exist as Disneyland empathy, the optimistic empathy of theme park neon lights and processed foods cruelly polluting a capitalist planet. However, one rocket, effectively targeted, can reach another world and create an otherworldly empathic civilization.

Jeremy Rifkin's empathic civilization model is far-fetched and underdeveloped, but it offers a visionary concept of life without unreciprocated attachment—and it can become reality if the empathy it discusses is focused and intensified. Lauren Berlant's cruel optimism offers and important analysis of the outcomes of affect-based attachments, but cruel optimism need not be the definitive theory of the human experience. Rifkin's opening arguments are correct: our planet is dying, and humanity must respond. Unless the systemically fueled cruelty of humankind's attachments is addressed, sociopolitical and scientific endeavors to address environmental problems will likely stagnate. Empathy may be the key—not as Rifkin describes it (sociable, widespread, affectionate) but as it should be: authentic, proactive, transformational, and intuitive. Either humanity will figuratively send an empathic rocket through the exosphere of cruel optimism to colonize an empathic civilization, or humanity will be forced to find a more literal extraplanetary solution.

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