Mitt Romney’s power of sympathy

Eduard van de Bilt

Stowe, a woman writer not supposed to engage in political commentary and like all American women at the time disenfranchised, hoped to solve the problem of slavery in the United States by depicting slaves as people in pain. According to Stowe, seeing others suffer would trigger in human beings a moral sense that immediately propels them into action. To those nineteenth-century readers who could not encounter the victims of the South’s slave system in real face-to-face meetings, Stowe offered her fictional depictions of suffering slaves as a substitute experience, convinced that an ideal audience affected by the power of sympathy would immediately throw aside her book to support the abolitionist movement. Stowe did not aim to persuade logically and rationally; while pig-headed intellectuals will point out that part of her “theories” were derived from the Scottish Enlightenment philosophy of Adam Smith, as a sentimental woman writer Stowe intended to sway people with the help of the emotion of empathy.

Those familiar with recent American politics will immediately recognize the link between Stowe’s classic novel and this year’s American elections. The figure who brings together these different “moments” of American history and proves Stowe’s political value is the speaker who most mesmerized Americans during the recent Republican and Democratic party conventions, the politician famous for feeling the pain of others, Bill Clinton. Clinton always managed to give Americans the impression that he cared: he won the presidency exactly because he had Stowe’s power of sympathy.

Although as Stowe scholars have indicated and Clinton proves, empathy can create odd liaisons and affinities, what is intriguing is the odd transformation that empathy underwent in the years between the Clinton presidency and publication of Uncle Tom’s Cabin. Whereas Stowe promoted the power of sympathy to engender altruistic citizens, in our days empathy is invoked as a standard for good leadership and tainted by electoral egotism. No longer relying on the power of sympathy to transcend the boundaries of their own selves, voters use it to force presidents to resemble them.

Harriet Beecher Stowe’s famous nineteenth-century anti-slavery novel Uncle Tom’s Cabin is not just an early example of modern management theory and public relations strategies and a vivid illustration of changes in America’s protestant tradition, but also the proper guide for understanding 2012 presidential politics. Stowe’s sentimental “philosophy” explains and predicts this year’s election outcome.
Why does the electorate nowadays insist that its leaders feel their pain? Perhaps the renewed emphasis on the president’s power of sympathy does what the notion of political representation fails to achieve and provide. As historians and political scientists have shown, the concept of representation is a fiction. No politician can truly represent all of his or her constituents. Despite the voters’ efforts to make sure that their elected officials identify with and resemble them, to some extent politicians will always differ from the constituencies that elect them. In the resulting distrust of politics and politicians that often appears in American history (and that finds its most recent representative in the Tea Party) voters rely on Stowe’s empathy to bridge the gap between the electorate and the candidates for office. They display the kind of political narcissism that emerges often in the relationship between voters and politicians. When the American electorate meets its politicians face to face to look into their eyes, it wants to see itself. It wants its politicians to be “one of us.” However, even though (unlike Stowe’s encounters) there is no identification with others here that produces civility but egotism, there is nothing wrong with this kind of narcissism: it contains utterly democratic features. The electorate demands that the presidential contenders display empathy to make sure that they will protect its desires and interests and not abuse their power.

The presidential contenders and their staff realize full well what the people expect from them. Humanizing the candidates, making sure that the electorate knows they feel the people’s pains and even occasionally sees the candidates suffer, was what the recent party conventions were all about. It pays to have biographies full of mishaps ranging from poverty and disease to problematic parent-child relations and sibling rivalries: all these represent the twenty-first-century equivalent of the nineteenth-century log cabin narrative. It pays to emphasize the candidates’ “Stowean” aspects over and against their old-fashioned, male, macho qualities. These efforts at humanizing are the more necessary when the candidates for the highest office are the representative of an academic world notorious for its rationality and a business tycoon hailing from an environment not known for its sentimentalities either.

It must be clear that Mitt Romney is severely handicapped in this empathy quest, however. Unlike Romney, Obama has had more than three years of experience as comforter in chief, given its prominent role in African American history is more likely to have read Uncle Tom’s Cabin, and unlike Romney is the father in a family dominated by women. As Stowe argued, the power of sympathy thrives particularly in a female environment. Obama’s biographers show that he is familiar with the tradition of empathy thanks to his years in law school. Moreover, given the current-day political relevance of the power of sympathy it is odd that Romney is not aggressively defending the American welfare state tradition. Stowe’s tradition of empathy saw society as a home presided over by a caring mother and helped bring about the programs at the heart of the United States social safety net. If, as presidential contender, Romney can’t act the house wife, despite the many houses he owns he will never enter the one house he is desperately seeking to acquire.

Humanizing Mitt won’t help. Republicans engaged in the effort don’t realize the advantages Obama has in the realm of empathy.

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