

Adeolu Oyekan

Dr AO Oyekan, Identities
and Social Cohesion in
Africa, Nelson Mandela
University, Port Elizabeth.

E-mail:

adeoluoyekan@gmail.com

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When reason is not enough for social cohesion: rethinking the place of emotion and art in politics

Reason has often been defended as critical for the prudent harmonisation of competing interests, security and social cohesion in organised societies. Human rationality however, now appears inadequate to cope with the spate of conflicts and dysfunction in many societies, postcolonial Africa inclusive. Thus, imaginative approaches to fostering social cohesion are required. In this paper, I argue that the dichotomy that elevates reason (equated with logic) and derides emotion (equated with irrationality) is not only misplaced, but also unhelpful. I defend art as a valuable vehicle for creating the dialogic space that fosters empathy, make politics affective and promote social cohesion. I conclude by advocating a complementary integration of reason and emotion, with particular focus on empathy, as a remedy to dysfunctional, antagonistic politics, especially in societies confronted by the complexities of diversity.

Keywords: Reason, art, empathy, emotion, social cohesion

Introduction

The question of how best a society is to balance divergent interests between groups and individuals has exercised philosophical thinkers from the ancient period. Plato, for instance, concerned himself with the twin question of what political system is best for

managing the different values and interests of those who make up the polity on the one hand, and who is most qualified to rule, on the other (Plato 1989, 1992). Arguments on the importance of reason for social order strongly characterise social contract theories, as can be found in the ideas of Thomas Hobbes (1650), John Locke (1980) and in more recent time, John Rawls (1996: 56–57). The social contract theory is the position that the moral/political obligations of individuals in the society are dependent on some sort of contract, compact or agreement among the members of that society. Its aim then is to give a rational justification why members of a given society ought to sanction and comply with the rules and norms of that society (D'Agostino et al. 2019).

Today, questions about why a given state is to be organised in a particular way and not another, and how to reconcile competing values and interests within a single political entity, continue to arise as more multicultural societies experience conflicts arising from seemingly irreconcilable differences. The management of different interests that vary from the economic to the social, cultural or religious, among others, is a permanent feature of politics. These interests are championed and challenged by people who as stakeholders within a geopolitical space, possess a divergent understanding of what is 'good' and 'right' (Stoker 1992: 369).

In the United States, the electorate has become increasingly divided along party, demographic and cultural lines, such that very deep fissures now exist between and within the parties (Jacobson 2016: 226). One of the many consequences of this is the difficulty in addressing issues agreed by most of the parties as being of great importance, such as immigration, health, crime and education. Such divisions manifest too, in the ongoing efforts to vaccinate all eligible Americans against the coronavirus. On account of the dysfunction, the last Congress was one of the least productive in American history (Wallner 2019). This situation is not peculiar to the United States, as a survey of the state of politics in many other countries across the world would reveal.

As social organisation has become more complex, with recurrent conflicts signalling a decline in the capacity for interpersonal, ideological and cultural dialogues, it is important to interrogate the belief in the power of human reason to harmonise contending differences and to promote societal cohesion. If nevertheless the apparent advancement in human reason today has come, paradoxically, at a time of increased conflicts, it suggests that human rationality on its own is no longer an adequate guarantee of social harmony. It is worth considering whether there are other ideas and concepts capable of complementing the role of reason in political and social organisation. This is especially more so in multicultural societies where diversity has made cohesion more difficult.

My aim in this paper is to show that whereas reason remains significant to how we understand ourselves and manage diverse interests, beliefs and values for the sake of mutually beneficial cohesion, it is no longer sufficient by itself as a criterion for achieving intersubjective understanding, or what Rawls would call overlapping consensus motivated by shared rationality. I aim to show further that our interests, beliefs and values are shaped in large part not only by how we rationally make meaning of our experiences but also by our emotional disposition. Based on this, I argue that it is not very helpful to sustain arguments that put emotion in opposition to reason. A more promising approach is to see reason and emotion in non-absolute, complementary terms, and then find ways in which they can be mutually reinforcing as drivers of interpersonal and cross-cultural understanding. I will also argue that art, broadly construed, can be of much use in opening up spaces of engagement between people of diverse interests, and generating the kind of other-regarding understanding and appreciation that makes integration and social cohesion much easier to attain.

In the first part of the paper, I trace the place of reason in politics from Plato to the early contract theorists, and its ascendant relevance since the Enlightenment. The second part focuses on the challenges arising from the limitations of reason in managing diversity, especially where there are competing rationalities. I argue that whereas reason has become integral to social organisation and the management of social complexities, it requires the complement of other factors for the attainment of social cohesion. Next, I examine the claim against emotion as being antithetical to reason; both can actually reinforce one another, especially as it relates to making politics more cohesive and less antagonistic. The fourth section is where I narrow down to empathy as a specific form of emotion that can complement reason in a bid to transcend divisive politics. In the fifth section, I argue that art practices, on account of their performative and elicitive attributes, are veritable vehicles for developing empathy, creating the dialogic space needed for empathetic understanding of the different other, making cooperation possible, and enhancing cohesive politics. In the concluding section, I argue that politics in Africa can benefit from becoming more affective, as elsewhere, notwithstanding some peculiarities of its postcolonial states, and make a case for greater focus on art education.

Reason and politics

Political philosophers, since the time of Plato, have placed a great premium on reason as having a significant impact on social engineering. It has maintained its relevance in some subsequent approaches to political philosophy, notably the social contract theories. Emphasis on reason as a necessity for social order

manifested strongly in the social contract theories that emerged as liberalism gained ascendancy, as can be found in the ideas of Thomas Hobbes (1650), John Locke (1980), and Rousseau (1998). The intellectual history of this view reached its peak in the Enlightenment philosophy of progress and individual freedom through reason (Frank 1988). While reason has been a subject of interest for philosophers since the time of Plato, the important connection it has with the Enlightenment is that it was at that period that it became emphasised as an important means of creating the conditions for remarkable social benefits (Israel 2011: 14-15).

Although the Enlightenment does not lend itself to a straightforward definition or to easy characterisation, especially with the emphasis by some scholars like Israel (2006, 2011) on the difference between its moderate and radical version, central to it is the idea that reason is the most veritable tool of understanding and improving the human condition. For Jonathan Israel, the Enlightenment is best defined as the quest for human amelioration occurring between 1680 and 1800, propelled in the main by 'philosophy', that is, what we would term philosophy, science, and social science, leading to revolutions in ideas and attitudes and actual practical revolutions, with both revolutions seeking universal answers for all mankind and, eventually laying the foundations for human rights, freedoms and representative democracy.

The link between the Enlightenment, reason and politics can be found in what Gaus calls 'Enlightenment Liberalism', which connotes the application of human reason to the progressive discovery of moral and scientific truths. Therefore, freedom of thought and conscience are fundamental, to the extent that they are relevant for the use of reason, useful for agreeing about the status of political and moral truths (Gaus 2003: 15). Liberals influenced by this view of reason believe that the free exercise of human reason produces a convergence of moral and political views. Morality, many liberals believe, can be derived from rationality. Reason, they believe, tells us what moral beliefs are justified and since, reasoning is the same for everyone, it follows that rationally justified moral beliefs will be the same for all. The most remarkable effort to ground universal morality on reason is that of Immanuel Kant, who argued that it is "a necessary law for all rational beings that they always judge their actions by such maxims as they themselves could will to serve as universal laws". An act is moral, according to Kant, if the principle or 'maxim' on which it rests could serve as a universal law for all rational persons. The idea of universal morality is therefore rooted in 'pure reason' (Kant 1959).

Personal opinions and beliefs can be appealing in their own right to those who hold them, but they are usually unable to receive universal acceptance, because they clash with the divergent beliefs of others. Liberals assert though that reason is different in that it is universal and unifying. A common notion of reason, it is

said, is central to our shared humanity. It is that which separates us from other things in nature, and makes social progress possible, through what Mill calls an “increasing body of truths” (Mills 1991: 27). The idea of reason is predicated on the belief that there are objective, discoverable truths not just about the physical world, but about human society as well. In the view of Ludwig von Mises:

[T]he essence of liberalism is just this, that it wants to have conceded to reason in the sphere of social policy the acceptance that is conceded to it without dispute in all other spheres of human action [...] Problems of social policy are problems of social technology, and their solution must be sought in the same ways and by the same means that are at our disposal in the solution of other technical problems: by rational reflection (Mises 1985: 7).

Kant and other Enlightenment liberals recognised that people often disagree on matters of science or ethics, but they perceive such disagreement as rooted in mistaken beliefs or irrationality, for which Enlightenment was the cure – through the better use of reason to discover truths about natural phenomena, as well the social and moral spheres. “The ideal model was Newtonian physics: just as our common reason had uncovered the laws of matter and motion, so too could it be expected to uncover the laws of human nature, society, morals and politics” (Gaus 2003: 15). There was significant consensus in the 18th century that the accomplishments of Newton in physics could well be replicated in the sphere of social understanding. A central aspiration of the Enlightenment was to provide standards and protocols for debate in the public realm, such that through rational justification, actions and opinions could be adjudged just or unjust, rational or irrational, enlightened or unenlightened (Gaus 2003: 16). Rational justification was to take the place of authority and tradition by appealing to principles recognisable by all rational persons and rid of the dogmas that superstitions and religion had hitherto legitimated.

Politics and the limits of reason

There began to emerge however, considerable resistance to the idea that reason, especially as framed in Enlightenment thinking, can explain universal realities, much less address the challenges arising from them. The first shock for Enlightenment thinkers was the profoundly different ways of life with which Europeans came in contact in the course of exploration voyages. Unsurprisingly, the immediate response to these shocks was to label divergent cultural practices as primitive and inconsistent with the principle of universal reason (Gaus 2003: 6). Increasing attacks on Enlightenment assumptions about objective reason over a period of time led to a more critical focus on it. One view, held by radical pluralists

such as Isaiah Berlin (1990), holds that divergent social views are fundamental and irreconcilable; and in the opinion of the German legal scholar Carl Schmidt (1976), contestations for supremacy between different moral and political views are no better than the conflict between two religious beliefs, hence the need to respect differences without privileging one over another.

Max Horkheimer (1993: 84) argues that reason has played a very important role in advancing human progress by fighting vigorously for human happiness, freedom, autonomy and choice. Paradoxically, this progress has led to the emergence of a technical civilisation, which now appears to threaten the very ideals it brought about. Addressing reason's potential for self-destruction and moving the Enlightenment project forward to build on its gains therefore requires paying close attention to its contradictions, and the implications for social reality. Moderate pluralists like John Rawls (1996: 57-58), however, concede the diversity of rational worldviews and the impossibility of a single foundation of rationality, a situation he says arises from the challenges of the 'burden of judgment'. Nonetheless, he countenances the possibility of subjecting these plural reasons to further reasoning in the search for possible consensus. In this wise he echoes Kant, who in spite of his acknowledgement of the limiting influence of human nature on the quest for universal reason, called for a rational process of adjudicating between competing views. In essence, reason is the cure for the challenges against reason. The idea of deliberative democracy gained significant influence largely due to scholarly efforts to address what is perceived as the banalisation of the enlightened idea of agreement through reasonable debate.

In spite of the moral, cultural and historical objections to the idea of universal reason as projected by the Enlightenment, liberalism proved resilient, and continued to flourish in the 20th century, especially with the collapse of the old Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. Liberal democracy and market reforms became the prescribed recipes for less developed societies in Central America and postcolonial Africa. Human progress, it was said, was at its peak, and it was not immediately regarded as premature when Francis Fukuyama proclaimed the end of history (1992). Over the last few decades however, the rise in nationalist agitations, populism and other variants of identity politics have created a situation in which the modern political condition has become transformed into one of disagreement and permanent diversity (Tinnevelt 2005: 146). Contemporary politics has become more adversarial, both at local and international levels, thereby rendering more difficult the possibility of addressing pressing social and political issues such as gender, racial and ethnic inequalities, climate change, and terrorism, among others. The implication of this is that the inability to address these issues on time allows them to fester, complicating thereby the social and political gridlock they have become. According to an influential view,

fundamental social differences, which have now become pervasive and deep-rooted, are pointers to the obsolescence of Enlightenment ideas, and the need for their replacement (Gray 1995: 122).

For all its famed capacity to mediate a deliberative process of engagement for the purpose of stability and order, reason is not always an adequate tool of productive engagement between diverse political interests. Different factors account for this. One is the shifty nature of the standard of reason itself. This is exemplified by the way in which utilitarianism as an influential measure of rational political choice in the 20th century was displaced by deontological theories motivated by the idea of rights and individual autonomy notably in the 21st century (Nardin 2015). These rights-based theories themselves are today being challenged by postmodernist theories that question their claim to universality. Postcolonial discourse, for instance, rejects what is seen as the abstraction of Enlightened thinking, which ignores the historical context within which multiple meanings of reason are generated. Competing notions of reason do not only arise however, across generations or geographical space. Even within a group of people bound by location and time, it is possible, as Rawls's (1996: 56) idea of reasonable pluralism suggests, to have competing accounts of what is reasonable or rational. Where there are contradictory conceptions of what reason entails, harmonisation becomes difficult and in some cases impossible.

In the view of Chantal Mouffe (2002, 2008: 7), much of the conflict and gridlock that make up the understanding of those regarded as 'the others' stem from liberalism's unwillingness to recognise the antagonistic dimension of politics, and the accompanying failure to appreciate the indispensable role of passions in the making of collective identities. Liberalism seeks to eliminate the adversarial essence of politics by invoking reason as a kind of arbiter that settles political disagreements with finality. The emergence of liberalism's hegemony has fostered a rationalist and individualist view of politics, which is incapable of adequately grasping the pluralistic nature of the world, and the conflicts that such entails. Political questions, however, are not always resolvable through technical expertise, as they require choosing between conflicting alternatives.

The implication of this is the emergence of a post-political age in which contradictions now manifest in more dangerous and virulent forms that transform adversaries to enemies. Not only has the optimism of the modernist, liberal project of rational politics evaporated, leading to the end of politics rather than the end of history; it has further hastened the emergence of its own negating tendencies like populism and nationalism (Mouffe 2008: 9). Mouffe's position is that antagonism is fundamentally inseparable from politics, and that its perpetual recurrence is essential for political progress. As to whether consensus is possible

in politics, she is very pessimistic, and dismisses the drive towards consensus through reason and persuasion.

Mouffe's conclusion in my view stems from her failure to distinguish between specific antagonisms and antagonism as a general feature of politics. This distinction, I believe, can help in appreciating the need for constant engagement between diverse groups and opinions, while also leaving room for consensus. It is possible, for instance, for ideologically divided groups in a given society to reach consensus on a specific issue such as universal healthcare, in the same way in which it is possible for a society with a history of historical injustices to come to negotiated agreements on how to redistribute privileges, say through land reforms, and educational and institutional opportunities, driven by affirmative action. These are instances of specific antagonistic, political issues finding resolution.

However, as society addresses some issues, patterns of relations evolve, generating new dynamics that throw up new challenges and areas of contestation. The different parties involved, again, are usually at different extremes of the pole, but are capable of getting closer with time, building consensus and arriving at a point of agreement, with the process leading yet to other dynamics that generate fresh grounds for antagonism. Sexual and gender rights come to mind in this instance, when one considers how societies with strident opposition came around to accept the right of individuals to assert sexual and gender preferences.

Rather than giving up on the possibility of consensus therefore, we can acknowledge its possibility in specific terms while insisting that antagonism in a universal sense is inseparable from politics. In the face of widening polarity therefore, the alternative is not to give up on efforts to reach agreements, but to explore ways of broadening the medium of engagement. Today, many societies are faced with very serious challenges like the pandemic and climate change, leaving little room for intractable antagonism on the basis of differences. This implies immediately that what is to be done is not to seek the elimination of reason and its replacement with another universalist approach that loses sight of the multidimensional nature of people and their social relations. Rather, it is to find means of complementing the role of reason in building cohesion and harmonising diverse interests. In the next section, I argue that emotion can complement reason in a good way, despite the numerous arguments against it.

Emotion, politics and social cohesion

It has long been believed that emotion and reason have different qualities, especially with respect to their different relationships to action and rationality. For many, emotion, at best, is non-rational and is irrational at worst. In addition, emotion has been said to be in many ways internal and subjective, such that whereas it is possible to see its expression, the rules of reason that sometimes make consensus possible do not apply to it. This means that our affective states for the most part are inaccessible for the kind of shared enquiry that is necessary for deliberative engagement with others (Marcus 2012). For some, empathy is a parochial, narrow-minded, and innumerate feeling incapable of providing much clarity in the public sphere, where we are supposed to engage with others. “We’re often at our best when we’re smart enough not to rely on it” (Bloom 2013: 4). He emphasises that one major problem with empathy is that we tend to empathise with people like ourselves, and as a result, its pursuit may undermine the principles of justice and care that it seeks to achieve (Kukar 2018: 2).

This reductive view of emotion’s role in politics stood for long in the way of a different, possible interpretation that sees it beyond the correct but limited description as unrestrained sentiment or feeling. While it is not wholly wrong to characterise emotion this way, it is equally possible to define it, and correctly too, from a more positive perspective of “longer-term affective commitments, moods, and emotions based on complex moral and cognitive understandings” (Godwin, Jasper & Polleta 2004: 413). In more recent times, there has been increasing agreement in scholarship that the idea of pure cognition without emotion, and emotion without cognition, are exaggerations of difference, which miss the extent to which emotion is connected to reasoning. There is also less certainty that cognition devoid of emotion is either attainable or desirable (Marcus 2012: 5).

The discussion of the difference between reason and emotion is also largely reflective of the rational choice theory that gained prominence decades back in the social sciences, and which sees emotion as antithetical to rational decision-making and problem solving (Long and Brecke 2003: 122). Inherent in the rationality-emotion division are three assumptions, which are that one, reason and emotion run on parallel lines, two, that works of art can only, or largely, manifest the latter to the exclusion of the former, and that emotion, as opposed to reason, is a vice.

The three claims above are disputable. Beyond the binary thinking that has gained wide traction through Cartesian dualism, there is little if any evidence that reason and emotion are mutually exclusive. To the contrary, there are good reasons to hold that emotion and reason cooperate and that “cognition would be rudderless without the accompaniment of emotion, just as emotion would be

primitive without the participation of cognition” (Long and Brecke 2003: 125). Further, the assumption that art is emotional as opposed to being logical also has little basis. Such a view measures artworks only in terms of the demonstrable aspect of their effects while losing sight of the embedded rationality in the process of their creation.

Also, while it is true that many beautiful artistic pieces are birthed in moments of inspiration, this does not imply that it does not require considerable cognitive exertion to harmonise musical notes, put finishing touches to a sculptural piece or embed drumbeats and dance steps with contextually relevant meanings. As Berys Gaut (2012) has noted, spontaneity may at times be non-rational, but it does not equate to irrationality. Our emotions, such as joy, fear, anger, pleasure, all arise under different circumstances, and so cannot be labelled simplistically without a deeper understanding of how they arise. Long and Brecke (2003), among other scholars, have discussed the diverse positive ways in which our emotions help to shape decision-making processes on a daily basis, and how, developing over an evolutionary period, they help us cope with challenges associated with survival and progress. As Bloom has observed (2016: 229), reason is itself far from being free from its own limitations. Given this, the limitations in both reason and emotion are best mitigated by complementing one with the other rather than privileging either. It is worth reiterating anyway, that it is reductionist to conceive art as mainly emotional. In fact, to focus on emotion alone again loses sight of the fact that what the arts do is not to immediately create empathy in us but to enhance our understanding and familiarity with the other, as steps towards deeper empathy and eventual acceptance. The challenge then, is in finding a way to moderate rationality with the elicited emotion arising from aesthetic goods.

Just like reason, human emotions vary, and can be manifested in diverse ways. One emotional disposition that is relevant to the management of social differences, and which has been under intense scholarly gaze, is empathy. One way of defining empathy is to see it as the capacity to gain a grasp of the content of other people’s minds and to respond to them ethically (Coplan and Goldie 2011: ix, Pedwell 2014). In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Adam Smith ([1790]2006) argues that though we do not have an immediate experience of what others feel, the process of assuming their situation imaginatively allows us to enter into them, thereby becoming in some ways the same person with them, and even feeling something which, though may be weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them. Some researchers on neuroscience and social cognition (Kaplan and Lacoboni 2006, Decety and Moriguchi 2007), using neural imaging, have offered a multidimensional account of empathy, which is reflective of affective response, self/other awareness, perceptivity, and emotional control.

At the social level, empathy manifests in the capacity to conjoin individual understanding and deep contextual appreciation of differences and group anxieties. Social empathy is the application of empathy to social systems in order to better understand the experiences of people, communities, and cultures that are different. The combination of empathy with an informed understanding of the social, historical, cultural and economic contexts of oppression and inequalities for instance, can promote social responsibility and advance actions that promote justice (Segal 2011). Social responsibility, according to Pancer and Pratt (1999: 38), refers to a sense of connection to those outside one's "circle of family and friends [and] . . . an obligation to help those in the community, nation, or society-at-large who are in need". The development of a reasonable level of empathy about the needs and situations of others helps in creating the needed environment for social cohesion (Singer and Steinbeis 2009), civic engagement and positive social change (Astin 2000; Loeb 1999; Frank 2001).

No doubt there are questions as to whether individuals or groups within or across societies (culturally, socially and psychologically located) can share the same feelings, on account of cultural, social and class differences, and whether emotions or affects, in their fleeting nature, lend themselves at a positivist register of 'accuracy' and 'equivalence' (Pedwell 2013, 2016). These questions become more important when the individuals or groups under consideration belong to different geo-political climes within the context of neoliberal and neocolonial affective technologies, designed to produce increasingly 'accurate' knowledge of 'cultural others', (Pedwell 2013: 23-25), and deployed for empathetic targeting by global powers for the insidious interests of regulation, discipline and even annihilation (Chow 2006; Povinelli 2011). Therefore, the idea of co-feeling with others and being in their shoes poses some challenges, a part of which is the tendency to ignore the role of positionality in individual or group experience. It is not so clear that an oppressor 'enters' and feels the experience of the oppressed in exactly the same way, even if we agree that doing so is possible or desirable.

Some critics (Freire 1990, DeTurk 2001) argue that the oppressor is much invested in the status quo, and as such may not find change to be of much value. Thus, while empathy may indeed be a useful tool, there is the possibility of deliberate blockage of its expression across classes and cultures by dominant groups. In many cases, the blindness created by privilege disproportionately puts the burden of empathetic understanding, and imposes what Swigonski (1994) calls the double vision or consciousness, upon the oppressed, who are constrained to negotiate their own experiences alongside that of the dominant group, whose ideals, norms and values get disseminated, entrenched and normalised by social, cultural and structural institutions created precisely for the protection of the privileges of power. Such situational asymmetry is capable of making difficult, if not impossible, reciprocal empathy, which is significant for social cohesion.

If we take these criticisms as valid, then there are implications for how we see the place of emotional dispositions such as empathy, and how it is mediated by art in multicultural democracies. Is it possible for instance, for black and white South Africans to be empathetic towards one another, imagining the situation of the other? Under what circumstances can genuine affect occur, beyond simulation and distant imagination, in a country like Nigeria, where over two decades of democratic governance, the longest in the nation's history, have resulted in deep social distrust and dangerous ethnic divisions? My response is that political and class differences, though real, are mediated by shared geopolitical location and experiences, which create common issues of interest within specific spaces and times. This interwovenness of experiences and the reality of mutual vulnerabilities arising from social divisions can go a long way in building important affective bridges and creating a sense of empathetic appreciation of others, for intergroup solidarity.

It is of course not impossible that shared geopolitical location can breed deeper resentment and antagonism within groups and competing interests, if there are perceived structural and group injustices which the state has failed to address. What this emphasises, however, is that the complexity of social challenges, especially in multicultural societies, requires numerous complementary angles for addressing differences and contradictions, which then require proper ventilation and articulation. What art contributes as a valuable tool of political engagement is to open the spaces both for the ventilation of grievances and the understanding of the apprehensions and concerns of others, as a precursor to finding mutually agreeable solutions.

Empathy, art and social cohesion

So far, I have tried to show that reason's aim for truth, though important, is not in itself sufficient for social cohesion. Factual knowledge and logic, though important in themselves, are not sufficient for navigating the complexities of the contemporary world, but require the complement of the narrative imagination nurtured through art (Nussbaum 1997, 2010). Conflicts are resolved when the context is more open and dialogic, which increases the possibility of what the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (1981, 1990) referred to as 'responsive understanding' from others. This is where the elicitive significance of art becomes relevant. Emotion, I have argued, can play a complementary role that balances rationality with feeling and understanding. More specifically I have dwelt on empathy as one form of emotion that is most needed for this sense of solidarity. Flowing from the above, the question to ask at this juncture is how emotions, more specifically empathetic understanding, can be built for social cohesion.

My aim here is to show that art is an important tool (probably one of many) through which a people's sense of empathy can be developed. I proceed from the position that creative aesthetic practices are capable of inducing empathetic engagement (Freedberg and Gallese 2007) by helping us, among others, to nurture the imaginative capacity, through which we are able to gain access into the situations of others (McNiff 2007). Artistic engagements also play very important roles in interpreting personal and collective experiences in ways that create novel narratives of social belonging and new affective capacities that stimulate a sense of collective responsibility (Kalmanowitz and Lloyd 2004; Lo 2016).

Art, as a human experience of symbolic representations, is also an experiential process which facilitates the orchestration of a holistic social experience that creates a deeply humanising social space in which individuals and communities affected by conflict use their symbolic representations to gradually come to terms with their identities, histories, and future possibilities (Arai 2013: 149). In cases where resenting parties avoid each other and build up tension that could explode at the slightest provocation, art provides avenues for parties to not only face themselves but also to express themselves. Through the theatre, stories about events that hurt are replayed, emotions are ignited and purged, the truth is revealed, consequences are relayed and the opportunity for a warm embrace to harmony is provided.

There are notable findings that show that art is a critical feature of sustainable community development and conflict resolution through the creation of spaces that allow for the expression of diverse perspectives on community conflicts or problems are expressed and potentially resolved (Hawkes 2001; Krensky 2001). Lowe (2000: 71) further found that "by having the opportunity to express and discover common concerns, neighborhood residents identified collectively shared experiences and enhanced collectively felt sentiments of solidarity".

Put differently, broadening our imagination in an empathetic manner to understand the viewpoint of others and to find common grounds that are mutually beneficial is possible through the exploration of the elicitive attributes of art. This requires however, an understanding of the needed balance between it and rational deliberation, preceded by a reconsideration of the view that art, on account of its emotional nature, is opposed to reason. Reason and emotion are tied together and, to a significant extent, reason depends on emotion even as it seeks to constrain it. While the products of reason may sometimes seem impersonal and objective, the experience of reasoning never is. Emotion also connects human beings to one another and to the natural world through the virtues of sympathy and benevolence (Nardin 2015: 185).

Art, empathy and politics in Africa

In concluding, I deem it fitting to touch briefly on what the possible implications of deepening affective politics through art could mean for Africa. The reason, partly, for this is because at first glance one may well wonder if it is not too simplistic to imagine that art can help cultivate the kind of emotional attitude that moderates the divisive nature of political and social engagement in a continent buffeted by huge problems of identity conflicts, poverty and illiteracy, among others. In response, it is important to say that whereas Africa has a somewhat peculiar dimension to its social and political challenges, which has to do with its past entanglement with slavery and colonialism, it is in a general sense susceptible to the same challenge affecting politics and social relations across the world, which is the increasing divisions arising from the conflict of cultures, values, ideologies and other forms of interest. Therefore, it is possible to take both a local and global look at the issue, in terms of Africa in relation to other parts of the world, and even in terms of how the challenges manifest themselves within different postcolonial states in Africa. Differences in material details do not foreclose in principle the applicability of universally relevant solutions.

Also, it is worth re-emphasising an important point made earlier, to the effect that seeking to deepen the understanding of others through art and affect is not being proposed here as a singular magic wand capable of curing politics or social interactions of their binary, adversarial features. Exploring the potentials of art as a means of opening up or deepening existing frontiers of engagement in dealing with the divisions confronting many multicultural states in postcolonial Africa is just one way from possibly numerous ones. With a youth-heavy demography, art represents a useful tool that can broaden the imagination of the people, dispel stereotypes and create new lenses of seeing those regarded as the different other. Art has the capacity to imbue citizens, especially young, impressionable ones, with the vitally needed skills for flourishing in multicultural societies and being at peace with other people (UNESCO 2011).

Unfortunately, across Africa today, like the rest of the world, much greater attention is paid to the STEM disciplines, with a focus on meeting the seemingly endless technological demands of the time. This has often been to the detriment of education in liberal arts and the humanities. The binary view of education that seeks to privilege science-related disciplines over those in the humanities is a reductionist view whose creation of two cultures (Snow 2001) creates a false alternative in which society is either to pursue utility or utopia (Appiah 2015). If art is to play an effective role in fostering social cohesion in multicultural African societies, it will require a conscious effort of pedagogical and infrastructural reform of education and its underpinning philosophy across the continent. This

entails creating a central role in the curriculum for the humanities and the arts, and leveraging on them to cultivate a participatory type of education (Nussbaum 2010: 96) that activates and refines the capacity to see the world through other people's eyes.

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