



**University
of Victoria**

Graduate Studies

Notice of the Final Oral Examination
for the Degree of Master of Arts

of

TIM CHARLEBOIS

BSSc (University of Ottawa, 2015)

**“Coldness and Compassion:
The Abnegation of Desire in the Political Realm”**

Department of Political Science

Friday, June 16, 2017

10:00 A.M.

David Turpin Building

A357

Supervisory Committee:

Dr. Simon Glezos, Department of Political Science, University of Victoria (Supervisor)

Dr. Arthur Kroker, Department of Political Science, UVic (Member)

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Dr. Sonya Bird, Department of Linguistics, UVic

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Abstract

The concept of compassion has recently held a controversial role in political thought. Critics have tied it with the condescension and latent self-interest of pity, while proponents have asserted it as *the* ethical posture from which to approach the suffering of others. This thesis looks at the role of compassion in the political sphere, arguing that political compassion involves a decentring of oneself as the primary subject of political action, looking instead to forego one's own desire and to replace it with the desire of another. It pays particular attention to the thought of Hannah Arendt, who excludes this self-sacrificing compassion from the political sphere, due to the importance of speech to political action, and in turn, the importance of muteness to compassion. To Arendt, political speech intends to performatively bring one's uniqueness into the world, whereas compassion performatively denies this subjectivity and is fundamentally unpolitical. She asserts that not only do public displays of compassion destroy their very value, but moreover, that a focus of compassion and suffering in the political sphere overshadows the need for cool, sober discourse between equals. I argue that, even in accepting Arendt's definition of the political, there is space for compassion as a political labour. While Arendt asserts the need for speech and action in the political sphere, she conflates the free will involved in the plurality and uniqueness of the content of speech with the uniform, natural will *to* speak. Her articulations of the political realm, which require one to make oneself heard among equals, invoke at that same moment an immediate need for the labour of others foregoing their own desire to speak and act, to instead passively listen. Instead of being a realm exclusively to manifest one's will, the political instead requires a reciprocity of desire, and its abnegation.