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Mutations en Méditerranée

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Empathy and justice in the Mediterranean: when emotions become the norm

Mutations en Méditerranée (MeM)

Call for papers for the issue 4 | 2026

Deadline for receipt of proposals: January 15, 2026



© Instagram post on Banksy's account. Royal Courts of Justice, London, 8 September 2025

Mutations en Méditerranée (MeM) is a multidisciplinary research journal that focuses on the transformations taking place in the Mediterranean region. Managed by PhD students (doctoral schools 67, 354 and 355), it is supported by the **MESOPOLHIS** laboratory (UMR Aix-Marseille University, CNRS and Sciences po Aix). It offers a publication space for young researchers by publishing in open access one thematic issue per year. The journal welcomes articles in English and French.

Emotions, long studied by social psychology, neuroscience and comparative literature, are now being explored in a growing number of disciplines in the humanities and social



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sciences, whether in law (Jeuland, 2020), political science (Braud, 1996), anthropology (Le Breton, 1998), history (Corbin et al., 2016) or sociology (Hochschild, 1979). The emotional turn in the social sciences recognises emotions as social phenomena in their own right (Taïeb, 2024). Yet, empathy as an emotion remains relatively unexplored, especially in an interdisciplinary perspective. While psychology and neuroscience have studied it extensively (Decety & Jackson, 2004; Singer & Lamm, 2009; De Waal 2010), work in the humanities and social sciences remains limited, despite an emerging interest in its social, moral and normative role. This themed issue of *Mutations en Méditerranée* seeks to address this gap exploring the relationship between justice and empathy with a special focus on the Mediterranean region, by studying the role of empathy in the judicial system and beyond, in other social and normative contexts and through multiple disciplinary approaches.

The word empathy first appeared in 1873 in the writings of philosopher Robert Vische, (*The Optical Sense of Form*), where it referred to the aesthetic projection of a viewer into an artwork. It was not until the 20th century that the word left the field of aesthetics and entered psychology and social sciences. Under the influence of Theodor Lipps and, later, that of North American psychology, empathy came to refer to the ability to understand the emotions, needs and internal states of others. The emphasis is no longer on subjective projection onto an object, but on interpersonal relationships and the recognition of the Other as a subject.

Earlier periods refer to compassion, sympathy or benevolence rather than empathy:

- Compassion: from the Latin *compassio*, from *com-* ('with') and *passio* ('suffering'), literally meaning 'to suffer with' someone. It implies an emotional sharing of another's pain, often associated with a desire to act to alleviate that suffering.
- Sympathy: from the Greek *sympatheia*, from *syn-* ('with') and *pathos* ('feeling, passion'), meaning 'to share a feeling with someone'. It refers to an emotional or affective understanding of others, but not necessarily to a willingness to act.
- Benevolence: from the Latin *benevolentia*, from *bene* ('good') and *velle* ('to will'), literally 'to will someone well'. Unlike compassion or sympathy, it implies a positive and lasting intention towards others, regardless of one's immediate emotions.



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This call for papers invites contributions that examine empathy as an emotion constituting the sense of justice, and that analyze how it shapes, nourishes or challenges legal and social norms. Justice, understood as a system for regulating conflicts and distributing rights, requires a degree of empathic projection: understanding the situation of others, perceiving their harm, imagining their point of view. This interconnection runs throughout history, from the earliest legislative texts to contemporary debates. Beyond the law, archaeologists who reconstruct the lives of extinct populations, sociologists who observe the mobilisation of collective emotions, and historians who study medieval charity all draw on a form of cognitive or moral empathy. This issue thus aims to explore the relationship between justice and empathy, at the crossroads of disciplines and temporalities, in order to understand how this emotion contributes to the production, transformation or contestation of norms and informs social practices and collective representations, to the point of inspiring the creation of artistic work such as made by Banksy (London, 2025). It will also be an opportunity to question the place of empathy at the heart of the scientific process (Gallenga, 2008) in various disciplines, both in the choice and treatment of subjects, the construction of knowledge, the conduct of field research, and in the relationship with research participants.

Axis 1. Empathy as a creator of social and legal norms

Contributions may first propose to explore the mechanisms through which empathy contributes to the genesis, legitimisation and evolution of norms. The aim is to examine how the ability to empathise with others influences the development of legal and social rules, how it becomes an argument for normative transformation, and to what extent it can also be instrumentalised or challenged in these processes of creating law and collective norms.

A - Empathy and the sense of justice: norms, values and contexts

This section examines the role of empathy in the construction of the sense of justice and the development of legal norms, between moral legitimacy, risks of instrumentalisation and contextual variability. The Marianne Bachmeier case, when a mother killed the man on trial for the rape and murder of her daughter in Germany in 1981, illustrates how justice is rooted in both collective and individual empathy: compassion for the victim and identification with her suffering or that of the perpetrator fuelled a debate in which empathy became a vehicle for normativity. This connection



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is long-standing. The Code of Hammurabi (c. 1750 BC) modulated penalties according to social status, reflecting consideration for others. Modernity extends this spirit: mitigating and aggravating circumstances reflect institutional recognition of situations and motivations (Smith, 1759). Authors such as Bandes (2001) and Hoffman (2008) show that empathy can be a factor in fairness. But the tension with impartiality remains: many warn of the risks of a justice system that is too receptive to emotion — inequalities, criminal populism, instrumentalisation. These tensions vary according to legal cultures. In Western societies, empathy is integrated into judicial practice. Conversely, in some Mediterranean jurisdictions inspired by Sharia law, sacred texts take precedence, with judges referring to collective principles rather than individual experiences (Esposito, 1998; An-Na'im, 1990). Between these two extremes, hybrid systems combine state and customary law, where mediation and reparation express contextual empathy (Gluckman, 1965). Thus, cultural, religious and social values determine the place given to consideration for others in judgement. To what extent does this emotional resonance lead to legal changes? How do media narratives shape perceptions of justice? Contributions may therefore explore how empathy establishes, transforms or challenges legal and moral norms, through case studies, comparative analyses or the examination of mixed systems where the emotional dimension of law proves decisive (such as restorative justice).

While laws marking progress are sometimes necessary, at other times they serve as a tool to feign consideration of public opinion. Heavily criticised 'declarative laws' (J.-L. Debré, President of the National Assembly, 22 June 2004) fuel legislative inflation without even presenting normative content, but rather descriptive content. They merely discuss obvious statements and are, in this respect, referred to as "verbose laws" (Report of the Council of State, EDCE 1992, no. 43, p. 15 ff.).

B - Empathy and justice at the heart of healthcare systems

Empathy is considered to be the essence of *care* perspectives (Vannotti 2002). This concept, which has been widely reformulated, can be understood both as the 'ability to care for others' (Gilligan, 1982) and as an activity carried out to 'maintain, perpetuate and repair our "world" so that we can live in it as well as possible' (Fischer and Tronto, 1991: 40). Another section of the thematic issue will thus examine the relationship between care and the sense of social justice or injustice through the prism of empathy, from both a sociological and historical perspective. It can be used both to rally support for a cause (Traïni et al., 2009), e.g. through donation and awareness campaigns, and



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to refuse to help others in specific circumstances (Slote 2007). Indeed, high-profile cases regularly shake public opinion and help to focus attention on a subject to the point of interrogating normalisation of practices. Examples include the cases in France of Vincent Humbert in 2002, which reignited the debate on euthanasia, Chantal Sébire in 2008, who committed suicide because she was denied access to assisted dying, and Vincent Lambert in 2013, who died in 2019 after his treatment was withdrawn. All of these cases reignited the debate on dying in France and 'reflected, in terms of care ethics, the fact that it is worse to kill than to let die' (Le Goff, 2008: 210). Such examples give rise to demands for autonomy, dignity and respect, supported by social justice. In August 2025, eight women died following caesarean sections performed at the Hassan II Hospital in Agadir. In the press, their deaths have mobilised the population around the issue of the failings of the Moroccan healthcare system, which is divided between the public and private sectors, with healthcare provision unevenly distributed across the country. How, then, does empathy help to mobilise citizens and institutions around existing care practices? How does it change the contours of these practices? How are the concepts of empathy and social justice being reappropriated in the Mediterranean and used to legitimise the maintenance or creation of health standards? This theme could cover both traditional topics (ageing, social work, family careers, care practices, etc.) and new ones (environments, non-humans, etc.).

Axis 2. The place of empathy in the implementation of justice and social mobilisation

A - The fluctuating expression of empathy in court decisions

The word 'justice' has two meanings. Justice refers first to a moral requirement that translates into a feeling varying from one person to another: an identical situation can be perceived as fair or unfair. Justice also refers to the judicial authority, i.e. the institution responsible for applying the law. With this second meaning, the implementation of justice raises questions about the role of empathy in legal cases. Its consideration in the judicial context can be observed as early as the end of the 19th century in France, with 'the good judge Magnaud' who contrasted 'human justice' with 'legal justice'. The Louise Ménard case is a case in point. This mother was acquitted after stealing bread, with the judge declaring that it was necessary to apply a 'more humane interpretation of the law, more in line with the ideas of social improvement that are winning hearts'. More recently, the case of activist Cédric Herrou who was arrested in 2016 for helping 150 migrants to cross the border from Italy to France,



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shows that empathy is at the heart of the development of new standards, giving constitutional value to solidarity with others, regardless of the legality of their stay in France. Is empathy an infallible compass when it comes to justice? Certain contemporary cases highlight the limits of this emotion in the enactment of standards, starting with the Halimi case. The perpetrator of the anti-Semitic murder of a 65-year-old woman, Sarah Halimi, was declared criminally irresponsible due to the delirium that allegedly seized him at the time of the crime. 'No justice, no peace', 'unfair justice', 'crime without punishment': the general empathy of the demonstrators described by these slogans clashed with the intransigence of the legal system on the issue of mental insanity. Contributions are invited to examine the expression of empathy and the legitimacy of taking it into account in the pursuit of justice.

B. Altruistic justice? The role of empathy in moral decision-making

The work of Daniel Batson, Michael Slote and Martin Hoffman shows that empathy can undermine the morality and impartiality of our decisions (1995; 2007; 2020). Indeed, we have a natural tendency to favour people with whom we share a strong degree of closeness over individuals we know little or nothing about. This familiarity bias (Hoffman, 2020) can now be directly questioned in light of the European Union's differentiated application of international law to Ukrainian and Palestinian refugees (Karaki, 2024). Furthermore, we are more inclined to feel empathy for victims who are visible and facing immediate distress (Batson et al., 1995). This present moment bias (Hoffman, 2020) would explain why Zain Al Rafeaa, the lead actor in Nadine Labaki's film *Capharnaüm*, benefited from a priority decision by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, following the global outcry sparked by his story – that of a Syrian refugee child living in extreme poverty in Beirut – with the success of the feature film at the Cannes film festival in 2018. However, this decision raises questions: is it morally fair to all Syrian asylum seekers who were also waiting for international protection? Finally, due to the excessive media exposure to which we may be subjected, empathic overstimulation can occur, leading us to numb our emotions and develop a defence mechanism that can be described as selfish drift (McCann & Pearlman, 1990; Hoffman, 2020). Social media is thought to be the primary vector for this overstimulation, particularly among young people, which can lead to psychological distress (Gault et al., 2022; Inserm, 2024). In this age of hyperconnectivity and rapid development of artificial intelligence, how can we minimise the risk of dehumanised justice? Drawing on psychology, social sciences, law, digital technology and applied ethics, this theme invites us to rethink the place of emotion in



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rational decision-making and the role of collective emotion in guiding moral and legal choices.

Axis 3. Contemporary alternatives

A - Towards an altruistic economy: empathy as a managerial and entrepreneurial lever

The field survey conducted by the consulting firm Ipsos in 2024 on 18-25 year-olds in the workplace reveals that seven out of ten young people consider it essential that their paid work be useful to society, with nearly 64% stating that the company they join must pay attention to the environmental impact of its activities. Sociologists Estelle Bonnet and Elise Verley, together with research and survey officer Zora Mazari, argue that young people search for meaning, as they want to break away from materialism and to focus on altruism (2020). For example, companies are now being held accountable, particularly by boycott movements that mobilise empathy to encourage a more altruistic economy. The example of BDS (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions against Israel) against Carrefour following the company's support for illegal Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank has led to the closure of stores in four key Gulf markets: Jordan, Oman, Kuwait and Bahrain (RFI, 2025). Contributions may thus propose to explore to what extent can empathy contribute to this quest for meaning and to the promotion of an economic model based on altruism? Can empathy be a managerial and entrepreneurial lever for placing human values at the heart of our market economy?

B - Empathy and spatial justice: towards the recognition of urban and environmental rights

Finally, this themed issue aims to analyse the interactions between empathy and justice in urban change and the protection of our environment. These concepts are part of a set of issues relating to rights to the city (Lefebvre, 1968), rights to housing, spatial justice (Soja, 2010; Harvey, 1973), urban hospitality (Sennett, 2018), the commons (Rochfeld et al., 2021), inclusive architecture (Hall, Imrie 2003) and the rights granted to nature (Serres, 1990; Descola, 2018). These concepts reflect a desire to reduce territorial inequalities, curb the commodification of cities and housing (Guironnet, 2024), and grant rights to natural entities (Latour 2010, Vanuxem, 2020). Industrial pollution in Fos-sur-Mer, south of France, illustrates the tension between economic activity, public health and the right to a healthy environment in the



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Mediterranean. The creation of citizen observatories reflects a collective appropriation of the ecological issue (Osadchty, 2015; Gramaglia and Duperrex, 2021). Environmental justice also implies epistemic justice, based on the recognition of situated knowledge and minority voices that the Capitalocene era too often tends to marginalise.

Empathy and justice can also be embodied in the promotion of more democratic and participatory forms of 'city and society building', through the citizen assemblies studied by Fatin-Rouge Stefanini and the collectives of architects working for territories and control of use, analysed by Delprat (2023). They also lie in the recognition of our cities inherited from colonial empires (Daumalin et al., 2025). Contributions may explore how the recognition of social vulnerabilities contributes to the emergence of new forms of solidarity, shared knowledge and renewed forms of spatial justice.

Submission requirements

Proposals for contributions must be between 2,500 and 5,000 characters in length (including spaces, excluding bibliography). They must include a title, keywords and the bibliography used. They are accepted in French or English.

Consult [Author guidelines](#)

Proposals should be sent in Word format (.docx) **by 15 January, 5pm**, to the following address: mesopolhis-revue-mem@univ-amu.fr

Please indicate your status and affiliation in the email.

Prospective agenda

Deadline for submission of article proposals: **15 January 2026 at 5 p.m.**

Results of the proposal selection process: **end of January**

Deadline for receipt of articles (V1): **April 2026**

Return of evaluations to authors (V1): **May 2026**

Online publication of the second issue: **November 2026**

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