**Establishing Empathy: Education, Emotions and Society in the Nineteenth and the Twentieth Centuries,**

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**Is the organisation Sea-Watch our contemporary ‘University of Empathy’?**

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Paraphrasing Ute Frevert’s expression (2011), one can regard NGOs and human rights activists as having historically functioned as “schools of emotions”, in which individuals and groups have learnt how they should feel and react when confronted with the pain of others. These collectives have thus become sorts of educators for the whole of society, invoking emotions – such as empathy – in order to justify their action in the name of a shared notion of humanity. Despite empathy being frequently used in humanitarian advocacy strategies as a universal and timeless emotion, this presentation will show to what extent it is a relatively recent phenomenon, the meaning and experience of which still remain problematic. Taking the citizen activism represented by the Sea-Watch organisation’s promotional T-shirt featuring the slogan ‘University of Empathy’ as a starting point, this paper questions its association with the ability to put oneself in someone else’s shoes. By analysing reports disseminated by this NGO, it will be demonstrated to what extent empathy has become an emotional ersatz, which actually hides other affective forces lying behind humanitarian action, such as the shame and indignation felt in the face of the lack of an orchestrated political response from the UE for accepting migrants on its territory. As it will be concluded, what we can learn from Sea-Watch’s rescue missions in the Mediterranean Sea, that have challenged EU policies, is the limits of empathy for cultivating civil disobedience in the name of human dignity.