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## Mass Movements and Coalitional Psychology

### Mobilization Requires Neither Tribalism nor Gullibility

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Common views about nationalism and populism are often based on the assumptions that (1) “tribalism” is a strong human urge or instinct that motivates adherence to groups or nations and (2) propaganda from demagogic leaders, by recruiting this tribal urge, can lead large masses of people to adopt irrational (and generally damaging) beliefs. These two themes have remained commonplace in the social sciences from Gustave Le Bon’s (1897) description of crowd psychology to 20th-century visions of powerful propaganda (Bernays, 1928/2005).

But both assumptions are misleading. The evidence from anthropology, human evolution, and experimental psychology supports a more complex picture, suggesting that (1) affiliation to groups and communities is not a brutish urge but, rather, the outcome of complex, context-dependent, rational capacities for alliance-building; and (2) people’s cognitive systems have robust defenses against persuasion attempts so that political propaganda is in general ineffective, even in the case of nationalism or “populism.”

Does this mean that there is no danger in demagoguery and chauvinism? No. In fact, the danger is probably greater than we would usually assume. Because of the group dynamics I describe here, incitement to ethnic hatred, for instance, can have extremely damaging effects without the tribal instincts and popular gullibility we usually imagine. To understand why this is the case requires that we investigate the processes that underpin group formation, beliefs in group identity, and the motivation to demonstrate commitment to a group.

### Why Would Anyone Be Committed to Their Group?

Reflections on nationalism or ethnic strife often rely on the assumption that human beings are naturally tribal or “groupish,” as psychologists sometimes state—that they “need to belong” (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 497). As Baumeister and Leary note, talking about a tribal urge does not help if we want to know how social groups are formed and how they support collective action.

Unfortunately, psychologists contributed to making the “groupishness” assumption more compelling by describing, for instance, how participants in laboratory experiments seem to bond to their “minimal group” (Tajfel, 1970; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). In these famous studies, an experimenter assigns participants to either one of two groups on the basis of clearly accidental criteria—for example, their preferences for one or another set of abstract paintings. In a subsequent, ostensibly unrelated task, participants are asked to provide judgments about individuals of both groups—for example, in terms of friendliness or attractiveness or intelligence—or to allocate goods (points or money) between all participants. The result, replicated many times, is that people generally favor members of their own “group”—for example, they give them more goods or judge them more attractive or intelligent (Diehl, 1990). The seemingly inescapable conclusion is that humans are so “groupish” that they will favor the members of *any* group to which they belong, however flimsy the grounds on which they “belong.”

In fact, the results do not support such a strong conclusion. In these experimental situations, each participant allocates goods (or symbolic accolades) to others, and each of them knows—this is the crucial point—that they will receive similar goods from others. So the results suggest that people expect the “minimal group” to be a minimal circle of exchange, within which there is more reciprocity than with non-group members. Indeed, when experimenters remove this reciprocity—that is, participants distribute those “goods” to others but do not expect others to know where the goods came from, nor do they expect to receive anything—people show no special in-group favoritism (Karp et al., 1993; Kiyonari et al., 2000). So the interpretation based on groupish instincts is not quite correct. People in these studies view the arbitrary category as sufficient grounds to expect some reciprocity—that is a striking result, for sure, but not quite the same as evidence for a spontaneous commitment to whatever group they find themselves in.

This story contains several important lessons for us as we investigate nationalism and ethnic passion. First, it shows that computations guide people's behaviors. What we may see, from the outside, as emotional and inchoate is in fact emotional and computational. Second, these computations may be largely unconscious. People who favor their own "group" in the minimal group studies are generally unaware of the fact. Efficient systems in the mind deliver the appropriate intuitions, that this or that person is attractive or deserving, without making apparent the computations that led to such intuitions. Third, apparent commitment to the group is a matter of individual strategic motivations. Rather than trying to fuse into a collective, people are pursuing specific interests given the available incentives. Fourth, the incentives greatly depend on what an agent expects others to know about the agent's behavior. This implies that signaling, making sure that others know what you did and where you stand, is an important aspect of the interactions that build groups. As discussed in this chapter, all these factors are crucial to understanding mass mobilization and the role of ideology and propaganda in mass movements.

### From Alliances to Groups: Human Coalitional Psychology

Social groups are obviously very diverse, from office cliques to bands of marauders, from trade unions to military platoons, and from tribes to entire nations. One should not try to put forward a general theory of groups, a morphology of such vastly disparate collections of agents. Rather, we should focus on the process of formation, the way agents manage to join others agents into alliances, and describe the psychology that supports such behavior.

There are alliances in other animal species, especially among close relatives such as chimpanzees, but those are transient, unstable, and limited in what they achieve and how many individuals they bring together (Harcourt & de Waal, 1992). By contrast, human alliances or coalitions can last for a long time, and they can enlist great numbers of agents in the pursuit of an unlimited variety of goals. This occurs as the outcome of a set of psychological adaptations, inherited dispositions, and capacities that motivate participation in alliances, and it helps individuals extract benefits from such behavior (Kurzban & Neuberg, 2005; Neuberg et al., 2010).

For alliances to emerge, participants must hold specific mental representations. First, they must represent a certain goal, such that it is better

obtained through joint effort than individually. Second, each individual must represent that the other members have a roughly similar representation of the goal. Otherwise, members of the alliance would not expect coordinated effort from others. Third, one must discount one's own costs in working for that common effort. Coalitional work, like other forms of collective action, requires behavior that may seem altruistic—that is, conferring a benefit to others at one's own cost. But the cost is offset by expected future gains from the collective venture—whether that expectation is warranted or not. Fourth, one must expect that others, too, will discount their effort. Fifth, one should expect others to have that expectation about oneself. Finally, one should represent all costs (or benefits) by the rival coalitions as benefits (or costs) to oneself so that one is motivated to increase (or decrease) them (Medina, 2007; Pietraszewski, 2013, 2016).

Obviously, no one represents these principles explicitly. They remain tacit assumptions. No one needs to be taught explicitly how to form alliances, how to feel about defectors, or how to reward commitment. These representations and motivations come naturally, from childhood, to normal humans in all human cultures, in remarkably similar ways (Tooby & Cosmides, 2010). Indeed, the principles are so natural that their description in game-theoretic or economic terms, as in the previous paragraph, may seem to consist largely of platitudes—platitudes, that is, for any member of the species that shares this particular cognitive machinery.<sup>1</sup>

### Groups and Power: Beyond Folk Sociology

In this evolutionary perspective, groups are the outcome of aggregated and coordinated individual behaviors, motivated by people's appraisal of the advantages of building or joining alliances. This allows the study of groups to avoid those commonsense or folk theories that we routinely use to make sense of the social world around us, and particularly our "folk sociology," a system of assumptions that organize many of our explicit notions about

<sup>1</sup> Naturally, to say that these strategic capacities are a result of natural selection does not mean that they are "innate," in most of the vague senses of that term. Humans are not borne with them, no more than they are born with teeth or sexual urges. It does not mean that coalitional motivations occur automatically, regardless of the environments in which organisms operate. On the contrary, the evolutionary picture suggests highly flexible strategic dispositions that compute costs and benefits as they occur in one's environment. Finally, the evolutionary hypothesis clearly does not imply that evolved capacities or motivations are "good" or commendable in any sense.

groups and power and that prove to be generally misleading (Boyer, 2018, pp. 216–237).

One major feature of our folk sociology, found in the most diverse societies, is that we spontaneously construe human groups as agents. For instance, we talk about villages or social classes or nations as entities that want this, fear that, make decisions, fail to perceive what is happening, reward people or take revenge against them, are hostile toward other groups, and so on. Also, we tend to assume that it is possible to describe the behavior of groups in terms of a generic agent. For instance, a debate about wages, about the consequences of having a minimum wage, are conducted in terms of what the “employees” and “employers” will do. In the same way, people will say that “women” want this or “men” do that—again, taking a generic agent as a simplified description of a specific population. This description of groups in terms of generic agents (e.g., “the workers,” “Latinos,” “farmers,” etc.) suggests either that their beliefs and motivations are fairly similar within a group or, more minimally, that an aggregate of most members’ beliefs and intentions is a good index of group-level behavior. But, as most social scientists know, emergent phenomena of interaction between individuals result in population-level dynamics that just do not correspond to individual-level facts (Schelling, 1971, 1978).

A second assumption of folk sociology is that power is a kind of substance attached to particular individuals, and its operation is analogous to a physical force. This is manifest in such phrases as “she has power,” “she lost power,” “his power increased,” and so on. This is not just a Western or European way of speaking. Such metaphors are familiar from many tribal societies, chiefdoms, and early states (Boyer, 2018, pp. 218–219). In the conventional metaphors of English, people have power and exercise power. We conceive of someone with power as able to “push” others toward certain behaviors (as a physical force can move objects); we say that people who did not follow the leader were “resisting,” that they were not “swayed,” they will resent being “pushed around,” etc.

These conceptions of social facts and processes are based on loose and misleading conventional metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Obviously, we all know that social groups are not literally agents and that power is not a force, but such metaphors do orient one’s thought in particular directions, all the more so if we are not aware of their implications. But the metaphors are very misleading, and that is particularly important when trying to understand a phenomenon such as mass mobilization.

## Commitment and Signaling

There are many obstacles on the way to efficient alliances (which explains why they are rare even in social species). Coalitions are a form of collective action, in which each individual invests time, effort, resources, or safety, with the expectation that the combined investment of many others will bring about benefits for all participants—think of a trade union as a simple example. The emergence of such collective action faces the major hurdle of free-riding. If collective action brings benefits, then it brings even greater benefits to those who managed to avoid paying any costs—for example, you did not go on strike but you get the pay hike that was negotiated as a result of the strike. Because all potential participants know this fact, they should all free-ride and collective action would never occur—the game-theoretic conclusion seems unavoidable. But collective action does occur because various tricks make it possible to overcome the ever-present threat of free-riding.

The main defense against free-riding and defection is our capacity and motivation to monitor other people's behavior, as well as the capacity and motivation to share that information with many others. The universal prevalence of gossip is only one among many symptoms of the human urge for acquiring information about others. Most of human evolution occurred in small-scale communities, where one's dealing with others, their cooperative or selfish behaviors, would have been a matter of largely shared information. The effect of such a situation is clear in the fact that reputation effects are so important in guiding people's behavior, in motivating cooperation as well as punishment for free-riders (Krasnow et al., 2016; Sperber & Baumard, 2012).

The logic of collective action implies that commitment should be highly valued. People who are willing to endure hardship in the pursuit of the common goal are highly valued as alliance partners. Conversely, defection and other behaviors that signal a lack of commitment usually trigger strong aversive reactions. People are very keen to monitor commitment and defection because investing resources and effort in a coalition is disastrous if others free-ride on the common achievements or if they defect when it is their turn to invest (e.g., if members of one's platoon run away when the going gets tough). That is why we are often so eager to detect signals of commitment in others, such as public statements that one is a member of the group or actual contributions in time, effort, and resources.

This explains why signaling is a crucial part of our coalition psychology. People need to communicate to others that they are members of the coalition

and that they are committed to coalitional solidarity. Wearing ethnically marked clothes or a uniform, cutting one's hair or beard in a particular way, and displaying particular tattoos are all instances of such signals, intended both for outsiders, to signal one's affiliation, and for members of the coalition, to show commitment (Gambetta, 2011).

A common kind of commitment signal consists in “burning bridges”—that is, behaving in a way that would make it impossible to leave the coalition, even if one wanted to do so (Boyer, 2018, p. 50ff). That is the reason why gang members intuitively see the value of gang tattoos, indelible marks of affiliation that exclude a change of heart. Another signal, common in political organizations, consists in displaying one's loyalty to the group by denouncing others inside the organization for their lack of commitment to the cause. For instance, participants in extremist movements, in places as diverse as Nazi Germany and extremist Zionist groups, denounce members of the group who may appear less committed to severing links with rival groups (Finlay, 2007).

Human coalitions are often competitive, pursuing their goals against those of other coalitions. A great part of coalitional psychology consists in mobilizing support against others. Why should that be the case? That is not because human nature is intrinsically antagonistic. More simply, the competitive nature of coalitions lies in the fact that they constitute attempts to recruit social support, and support is what economists call a rival good. The more someone gets, the less is available for others.

### Large-Scale Movements and the Problem of Coordination

Redescribing social movements in terms of a coalitional psychology has the advantage of avoiding misleading folk-sociological assumptions—for example, that groups somehow “exist” independently of aggregated individual behaviors or that power is a “force.” The coalitional perspective also provides a more precise and psychologically realistic understanding of the dynamics of mass movements.

Social movements are large-scale alliances, which because of their size are faced with issues of coordination. The term “coordination” is best described in game theory, where a typical coordination game is, for instance, the decision to drive on the right or left side of the road. In such situations, the options are equally attractive—there is no intrinsic advantage to either

solution—but players only get benefits if they take the same option as others. There are many other varieties of coordination games, and social interaction constantly provides us with situations of complex coordination (Camerer & Knez, 1997).

In the emergence of social movements, coordination does require such focal points—that is, expected choices that all members know others will expect too. Coordination requires mutual knowledge—that is, a set of representations that (1) most members hold in roughly similar forms and (2) most members expect other members to hold. This can take the form of a common, coherent ideology, made more similar in different minds by repeated instruction and rehearsal. Another coordination tool, particularly important in ethnic coalitions, consists in sharing historical or legendary narratives that provide a rationale for the existence of the group and for its relations to other groups (Brubaker et al., 2004; Wertsch, 2002; see Chapter 22, this volume).

Coordination requires that people have a precise enough representation of other people's representations so that these others' behaviors become more predictable. The fact that your neighbor views herself as a Croat, in a situation of heightened ethnic rivalry, makes it slightly easier to predict her reactions to specific events, her attitudes to Serbs and Bosnians, and so forth (Brubaker et al., 2004). Naturally, this does not provide certain knowledge, but it reduces uncertainty—a reduction that is necessary for scaling up cohesive action among a large collection of agents.

Coordination effects are crucial to understanding power dynamics, particularly the extent to which a movement, a dictator, or an entire regime can “gain power” or, on the contrary, remain powerless in the face of oppression. Asymmetries in the level of coordination—for instance, between an oppressive bureaucracy and a liberation movement—explain these power differences and dynamics (Hardin, 1995, p. 28ff). Consider the East European socialist regimes that stayed in place until 1989, although generally despised by the population, as became evident after their sudden downfall. These regimes took great care to boost coordination among the governing class by giving them unified training and a coherent set of ideological principles. At the same time, they were also very careful to dissolve coordination among the populace, mostly by restricting people's ability to communicate by establishing a surveillance system so pervasive that all citizens could legitimately suspect most of their acquaintances to work for the political police (Kuran, 1995).



Oppressive regimes of this kind can subsist without too much outright violence, as long as they can maintain in the populace some measure of pluralistic ignorance. This term denotes a situation in which agents have little, if any, information about other agents' preferences (Bicchieri, 2006, p. 186ff). As many have noted, including some communists, the regime cannot place a party member behind each citizen, and if they did, they would need to monitor the party commissars themselves, and so forth. But what the regime can do is make sure that although everyone guesses that most others hate the regime, no one can be sure about anyone in particular—a situation of very low coordination, in which it is almost impossible to initiate any course of action against the regime. The system was pushed to its extreme with the infamous Stasi of socialist East Germany, with its ubiquitous system of spies and informants (Childs, 1996).

Changes in the balance of coordination can result in sudden power shifts. For instance, the first gradual and then sudden collapse of socialist regimes in Eastern Europe surprised most observers and participants (Ash, 2014). It occurred when the populace managed to become more coordinated—that is, less bound by pluralistic ignorance—at precisely the point when the elites were losing their coordination, mostly because the central authority in Moscow was sending ambiguous or contradictory messages to the bureaucracy. Demonstrations in East Germany, or spontaneous jeers against the dictator Ceausescu in Bucharest, gave each participant direct information about the spread and intensity of opposition to the regime. Also, as the number of participants grew by the day, it became clear to all that the potential cost for participating was low enough to offset the possible cost of repression. Similar dynamics occurred in other countries, notably Hungary and Romania (Kuran, 1995, pp. 261–288).

These processes illustrate a dynamic that is crucial to understanding mass mobilization. Participating in the movement (e.g., demonstrating against a powerful tyrant) comes with expected costs and benefits. The threshold at which people decide to participate varies between individuals. A crucial variable that affects this threshold is each agent's intuition about how many other individuals will participate. Now, each time some individual joins the protest, and is seen doing so, that person increases the perceived number of participants and therefore decreases the perceived cost of participating. This should convince others, whose threshold for participation was just slightly higher, to join too, which in turn lowers the perceived cost and further contributes to increasing the likelihood that yet

others will participate. The economist Timur Kuran (1998) described and modeled this dynamic and its dramatic effects in ethnic identification. For example, sudden shifts in the proportion of Muslim men who signal their affiliation with Islamic or secular organizations do not mean that people's attitudes or opinions shift suddenly. Rather, they show that the cost of signaling particular allegiances is affected by cascade dynamics with tipping points (Kuran, 1998).

### **Epistemic Vigilance: People Are Not Gullible**

When we try to understand mass movements and popular enthusiasm for political causes, it is difficult not to assume that the crowds are easily persuaded. History offers many examples of crowds demonstrating fanatical adherence to some leader's discourse—from mass rallies in support of Mussolini or Hitler to the Red Guards storming through China during the Cultural Revolution, endlessly chanting the slogans of Mao Zedong Thought. Obviously, ascribing particular persuasive powers to the “charismatic” leaders explains nothing because the term simply indicates that the leader does have a persuasive influence.

The picture of demagogic leaders exploiting people's tribal urges creates two difficult problems. It implies that there are such tribal urges, which, as discussed previously, is not a plausible description of how movements are formed. In addition, the common picture suggests that the masses are easily persuaded. This is a problem because the alleged gullibility of masses is largely an illusion.

One cherished assumption most people share is that (other) people are gullible. We usually assume that most people acquire their beliefs by just absorbing or accepting what influential others told them, without much critical examination of the statements people endorse. This would explain why (other) people sometimes hold preposterous beliefs that we never would endorse ourselves. Leaving aside the narcissistic aspect of this assumption (see Chapter 11, this volume), how true is it that people are easily persuaded by low-quality information? Until recently, a good part of academic psychology would have endorsed the popular view. It seemed that experimental studies, using many different paradigms, converged on the idea that people were indeed easily persuaded (Gilbert et al., 1990). Among the psychological experiments best known by most non-psychologists are Asch's (1955)

“conformity” studies, which seemed to show how people will change their minds to suit the opinions expressed around them. So, it would seem, psychology had clearly demonstrated the power of persuasion in artificial, experimental contexts—suggesting that people would be a fortiori even more malleable in natural situations such as mass rallies.

In a critical re-examination of the original literature, Hugo Mercier (2017) showed that in most cases, the empirical studies either do not show much of a gullibility effect or in fact show precisely the opposite. The famous Asch experiments showed that some subjects followed suggestions and that most did not. With quite a lot of hard work on the part of experimenters and confederates, one can persuade *some* people, some of the time (Mercier, 2017).

In fact, the notion of a mind ready to accept any information others convey should seem, a priori, extremely implausible. Most people know from everyday experience that it is very difficult to convince others of their own beliefs, especially when others have prior knowledge of and opinions about the topics discussed. Far from being open to all manners of new beliefs, minds seem to exert strong resistance to suggestion. This is consistent with the evolutionary assumption that mental systems are functional—that they serve to enhance the fitness of organisms. In that perspective, it would be surprising if our minds were indeed open to suggestion from others. For all aspects of their lives, humans rely on communication and are therefore vulnerable to deception. The risk from harmful communicated information is mitigated by a suite of cognitive mechanisms that evaluate messages—that is, mechanisms of epistemic vigilance (Mercier, 2020; Sperber et al., 2010). These mechanisms weigh messages by scrutinizing their content and their source. People are more likely to accept messages that fit with their prior beliefs or that are supported by arguments they find intuitively compelling (Mercier & Sperber, 2017; Yaniv & Kleinberger, 2000). People are also more likely to accept messages coming from an individual deemed to have their best interests at heart (Bonaccio & Dalal, 2010). Particularly important is the sender’s ability to commit to the message: The more the sender can be held responsible if the message turns out to be harmful, the more believable the message (Vullioud et al., 2017). By contrast, when receivers perceive (rightly or not) a conflict of interest between themselves and the sender, they readily discount the message (Snizek et al., 2004). A wealth of evidence shows that both adults and children exert epistemic vigilance competently (Harris & Koenig, 2006; Mascaro & Morin, 2014).

### But What About the Madness of Crowds?

The previous comments on epistemic vigilance seem to fly in the face of familiar facts—that people do endorse strange beliefs, that conspiracy theories abound, and that online websites are filled with “news” that has little contact with actual facts. In short, we tend to think that there are too many examples of human gullibility, showing that people are easily convinced of the most absurd propositions (Mackay, 1841).

This common view is heavily biased toward the irrational and the sensational (Mercier, 2020). Such events occur, but a careful examination of the facts generally suggests a more nuanced account. For instance, many people have heard of the Xhosa prophet Nongqawuse, who during the British conquest of southern Africa allegedly persuaded her fellow Xhosa that the best way to repel the invaders was to burn all the crops and slaughter their cattle, as an ultimate offering to their ancestors. But this oft-cited example of mass delusion becomes less striking if we know more of the details. First, cattle at the time were afflicted with illnesses that made it a viable if unfortunate compromise to kill them before they got sick. Also, many people sacrificed a few of their animals rather than the whole herd. Finally, in many cases, people sacrificed not their own cattle but, rather, the property of distrusted tribal leaders. And when the promised benefits failed to materialize, people stopped paying attention to the prophet (Peires, 1989).

More generally, propaganda may be omnipresent without persuading. A limiting case is Nazi Germany, which would seem the prime exemplar of mobilization through demagoguery. It is true that many Germans were mostly supportive of the National-Socialist anti-Semitic program (Herf, 2006). But even in this case, careful studies show that the effects of rallies and relentless propaganda were very small. That is, people attended to Nazi discourse, joined meetings, and believed Hitler’s discourse to the extent that they had prior anti-Semitic beliefs—propaganda itself did not change people’s views (Selb & Munzert, 2018).

It certainly is true that cult leaders, for instance, can persuade some people, sometimes, to behave in accordance with extraordinary doctrines, sometimes even leading to collective suicide (Gardner et al., 2008; Guinn, 2017). We may be tempted to view such occurrences as evidence for the overall gullibility and suggestibility of humankind, but they may show the opposite. These exceptional cases demonstrate, if anything, that it takes extraordinary

effort to get people to behave in these irrational ways.<sup>2</sup> All this suggests that the ordinary mind in ordinary conditions is not quite as susceptible as we would like to think.

### Mass Movements and the Role of Ideological Expression

An evolutionary perspective on coalitions also helps in understanding why people engage in particular kinds of political activity. In many social and political movements, people spend a great deal of time and energy in mostly expressive activities, such as demonstrations, rallies, or, in recent times, internet debates. These expressive activities are puzzling because they do not contribute to realizing the political goals of the movement. Many participants would think that the goal in such activities is to persuade others, to recruit as many supporters as possible for the movement. But research on epistemic vigilance converges with political and historical scholarship in suggesting that political discourse only has a very limited effect (Kalla & Broockman, 2018). These are social phenomena that seem so natural to us that we hardly pause to think about them—but they are natural only because we share the psychology of participants in mass movements.

Does this mean that participation in expressive political activities is simply misguided? Not really, if we take into account the motivations and computations involved in coalitional psychology. Rallies, demonstrations, and the repetition of slogans and propaganda may have specific effects that make them intuitively attractive for members of a coalition, including those discussed next.

### Coordination Through Internal Signaling

Large-scale coalitions depend on efficient signaling that increases coordination between members. That is why a great amount of signaling is directed at members themselves. In order to persuade members that continued commitment is a good investment, the leadership has to convey to them that the coalition is numerous, cohesive, and decisive in the pursuit of its goals.

<sup>2</sup> Cult leaders, who intuitively know what to do, take great care to recruit vulnerable individuals, isolate them, exhaust them, submit them to schedules of random rewards and capricious favors, and so forth (Dawson, 1998).

That is why many social and political movements favor large-scale meetings, which from the standpoint of mere communication are a waste of time but create powerful signals for all participants. The sheer number of participants in such events conveys a cue of the strength of the coalition. Synchronized chanting and choreography (pushed to an extreme in the Maoist or Nazi cases, but also widespread in many other mass movements) constitute a cue that the coalition is cohesive—that all its members are on the same page, so to speak. Finally, to survive, a coalition needs to demonstrate to its members that everyone is strongly committed, which is why meetings often include passionate speeches and extremist statements of allegiance.

### Forced Disclosure

Signaling creates situations in which not sending particular signals is the equivalent of sending a specific one. This is well known in evolutionary biology (Maynard Smith & Harper, 2003), and signaling in social movements may create the same dynamics. The fact that someone is not sending any signals is itself a signal. For instance, Vaclav Havel (1985) famously described how Prague grocers would plant signs with Marxist slogans right in the middle of their vegetables to get the political police to leave them alone. In such a totalitarian regime, anyone who does not signal allegiance to the regime is thereby declaring themselves a dissident. More generally, it makes sense for a mass movement to try to exclude silence and indifference. If people have the option of *not* supporting the movement, there is great danger to a coalition's cohesiveness.

This forced disclosure sometimes extends beyond mere adherence to the regime, and it demands that people adopt a particular slogan or turn of phrase. In this case, even people who express the same ideas as the movement but do not use the approved formulation are viewed as potential defectors. That is, of course, a phenomenon that also occurs in some religious traditions, punishing those who share the beliefs of the movement but fail to state them in the exact terms used in the received creed.

### Why Isn't Everyone a "Populist"?

Turning now to a more speculative set of issues, the evidence and models summarized here may help reframe the pressing question, Why are

demagogic leaders and “populist” movements successful and seem to be very much on the ascendant throughout the world, from Hungary to the Philippines and Brazil to the United States? In the media as well as intellectual circles, most people who discuss these issues agree that the influence of nationalism and “populism” has increased, is increasing, and should be diminished. And the most common explanations for its success are based on the assumptions discussed here—that people are gullible and that tribalism is an inchoate or primitive motivation. Now that we have (it is hoped) discarded these facile and misleading assumptions, it may seem more pertinent to ask, Why would nationalism and populism *not* be successful? Why isn’t everyone a populist nationalist?

A consideration of our evolved psychology may suggest a speculative answer. Most people in most places are familiar with two kinds of social interaction: positive-sum and zero-sum. The former occurs in voluntary exchange, when we trade goods or labor, or in collective action, when we join forces to achieve a common goal. In such contexts, both parties benefit more than they contributed. In contrast, interactions such as warfare, sports competitions, or romantic rivalry are zero-sum: They result in one party losing resources that the other one earns. Different social and historical circumstances provide social environments that vary in the proportion of these two different kinds of social games. People who grow up in stable and safe social environments, with reduced uncertainty about future resources, and in an ethnically homogeneous nation may consider positive-sum games a natural feature of the world and the default assumption when considering interaction between social groups. By contrast, people who are more familiar with social strife, uncertain access to resources, and a more divided polity may come to see zero-sum games as a default setting for group interaction.

There is considerable evidence for this difference and its connection with experienced environments. This is observed, for instance, in measures of generalized social trust—the extent to which people assume that others around them are on the whole cooperative rather than antagonistic (Sønderskov, 2011; Welch et al., 2005). It also appears in people’s performance in economic games, where participants have the opportunity to cooperate for everyone’s advantage or defect to their own benefit. In these contexts, people from Denmark, for instance, show more cooperative motivation than those from Sicily (Herrmann et al., 2008). This difference does not occur only between nations or cultures. Dan Nettle (2010) showed the same kinds of contrast between different neighborhoods in Newcastle in England. Indeed, if we

accept the explanation in terms of early exposure to different social worlds, we would expect such differences to occur as a function of social class and degree of prosperity, much more than ethnicity or culture.<sup>3</sup>

These different attitudes may be relevant to the success or failure of populist movements. Consider, for instance, the issue of mass immigration, which dominates political conflict in many Western countries. People familiar with positive-sum interactions tend to view this new challenge as an opportunity for mutually beneficial interaction. As a result, such people infer that opposition to immigration *must* be rooted in bigotry, xenophobia, etc. By contrast, people more familiar with zero-sum interactions view the arrival of any newcomers in an interaction as a potential threat, as the newcomers have the opportunity to extract benefits without having previously paid their dues.<sup>4</sup> People familiar with zero-sum interactions infer that an immigration supporter *must* be motivated by the desire to harm them and benefit others.

Similarly, a zero-sum orientation makes the contrast highly intuitive, between “elites” and “the people,” as two camps with necessarily opposite interests, with the implication that whatever benefits the elites is detrimental to the populace. A zero-sum view also dovetails with a vision of the wealth of nations as a fixed pie, such that the prosperity of some necessarily entails the immiseration of others, a very common view despite the best efforts of economists (Boyer & Petersen, 2018).

So the zero-sum orientation may ground both the populist aspect of modern political movements (an emphasis on downtrodden communities losing out in current economies) and their nationalistic aspect (an emphasis on one’s coalition as a closed solidarity circle).

A common view of mass mobilization is that persuasive leaders managed to convince large numbers of people of the truth of their ideology. This suggests that the antidote is to prevent such effects—to counter propaganda before it diffuses through the population. But this may be illusory because the prescription is based on the wrong diagnosis. To put it in the simplest terms, populist nationalism seems to be a response to popular demand, and an evolutionary

<sup>3</sup> This adaptability is itself an adaptation—a flexible response to variability in natural and social environments. Life history models (Gluckman et al., 2007) describe the conditions under which, for instance, childhood conditions influence a general attitude toward cooperation, long-term goals, deferred gratification, etc. that appears during child development—that is, it may in fact be an adaptive response to different kinds of environments (Sheskin et al., 2014).

<sup>4</sup> Experimental evidence suggests that newcomers to some alliance are implicitly categorized as potential free-riders, which in turn motivates aggressive motivations against them (Cimino & Delton, 2010).



perspective may explain why the demand increases when people's changed environments activate particular heuristics for representing the social world (Petersen, 2015). Describing the success of populist nationalism in terms of coalitional psychology does not by itself provide much of an antidote, if any is needed. But it may help us understand how social or cultural disruption, growing inequality, and increased uncertainty about economic prospects can make zero-sum ideologies compelling, with the implication that a significant change in these parameters is required for the opposite trend to occur.

Many intellectuals (that may be an occupational disease) tend to think that their own position is the sensible one that a reasonable individual will reach, unless their perception of reality is clouded, their intellectual skills are below par, or their reasoning is swayed aside by powerful passion or the persuasive power of demagogues. This variety of naive realism is probably misguided. We can explain mass participation in social movements, including ethnic chauvinism or xenophobic forms of nationalism, in terms that are less metaphorical, self-serving, and misleading if we take into account the precise combination of evolved motivations and capacities, on the one hand, and highly specific historical conditions, on the other hand, that make them attractive to large numbers of people.

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