

Primate Politics and the Cognitive Profile of a Proto-fascist Leader

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Abstract: *In this paper I will construct the likely cognitive profile of right-wing populist leaders with authoritarian tendencies. I will in order review disparate literatures on human and non-human primate leadership, the psychology of power and corruption, and the cognitive evolution of coalitional and political behaviour. Then, I will select the likely traits and features observed in right-wing populist leaders which can be plausibly traced back to hominin evolutionary history and discuss their application in current politics. I will further connect the resulting profile with current advances in populism scholarship, with the special mention of a certain 'shamelessness' and lack of etiquette which right-wing populist leaders employ in their attempt to maximize power for themselves and their coalition. To this end, I propose that such shamelessness has its origin in non-human primate domination dynamics and facilitates the cognitive appeal of right-wing populist leaders among politically disconnected and disgruntled voters. On the grounds of appearing honest by appealing to base intuitions shared by all humans and by dismissing political etiquette, primate populists build up their follower base by providing cognitively attractive content easily transmissible on available media technologies. Finally, I will argue that due to the ancestral hominin motivation for power and prestige, seconded by a lack of concern for institutional checks and balances, a right-wing populist leader, or proto-fascist, will seek to enhance their power if possible up to the point of authoritarianism.*

Keywords: *Cognition; populism; evolution; intuitions; primates*

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1. Introduction

Human minds are not blank slates, and human behaviour is subject to change and variation as a function of cultural and biological evolution. Cognitive traits inherited by humans from their hominin ancestors, as well as those shared with other great apes, which are related to negotiating social hierarchy and political power acquisition are also likely present in any political actor running for office today. Right-wing populists' ascension to elected office appears particularly suited to reflect ancient primate domination patterns due to its interaction with intuitive cognitive processing as well as with a lack of reputational concern. This affords populists the freedom to dismiss political etiquette as they increase the power of their coalition. As a result, right-wing populists lead their countries towards modes of government which are increasingly authoritarian. The aim of the present contribution is to look inside the mind of a right-wing populist leader in order to work towards establishing reliable predictions for the likely future behaviour of such leaders.

Societies of human and non-human primates are stratified in specific ways as a result of evolutionary and cultural variables impacting each society. However, a clear-cut pattern of political power relations can be observed from the anthropological record and primatological studies describing power asymmetries as a function of species, as well as a function of the size of said societies.

Repeatedly recurring social patterns which can be observed across human evolutionary history are best suited to highlight the underlying dynamics of nature and nurture that drive political, as well as natural laws of complex systems that emerge and stabilize in predictable ways and which we today call societies. Because minds create societies¹, and because humans possess species-specific cognitive abilities and limitations that likely circumscribe the political organization they create, by looking into these cognitive constraints we can arrive at a clearer picture of human politics.

¹ Pascal Boyer, *Minds make societies: How cognition explains the world humans create*, (Yale University Press, 1st Edition, 2018).

Power and corruption appear imbedded in human political cognition, and there is evidence that we share these traits with other species as well. But there are also traits which appear exclusively human. For instance, humans oftentimes attach meaningful narratives to the communities and to the societies they create. These simple origin stories have been documented ever since the beginning of recorded history and are still widely used today. And right-wing populist leaders often rehash nativist tales and bank on voters' nostalgic connection to their imagined past.

Because simple stories are intuitive, populists represent the world in intuitive terms. But our intuitions are sometimes mistaken and can lead to outcomes that are detrimental to certain perceived outgroups. Right-wing populists win voters over by delivering an intuitive worldview which connects well with the intuitive worldview of their voters. On the other hand, scientific ideas and expertise can at times seem counterintuitive, and populists capitalize on this when they declare that 'the people have had enough of experts'.²

Once populists gain popular support, they are able to successfully portray democratic institutions as enemies of the people. To this end, they reject reasoned dialogue, political norms, and expertise, and antagonize institutional checks and balances. Populists then attempt to increase power for themselves and for their coalition, to the extent that they are able to circumvent democratic institutions designed to keep autocratic tendencies in check.

The first layer of the cognitive profile of a right-wing populist leader is likely determined by primate power relations and dominance patterns present in humans and great apes, to which I will turn next.

2. Primate Politics

2.1. Coalitions and the political arena

To the extent that humans share any traits with other primates, it can be inferred that the cognitive machinery responsible for producing those traits was most likely present in the last common ancestor of humans and

² Richard Portes, "I think the people of this country have had enough of experts", *London Business School*, May 9, 2017.

other great apes. Similarly, in cases when we can identify phylogenetic consistency between species (e.g., traits shared by different genera), including humans, it suggests that these traits and behaviours observed in humans and other animals are therefore not uniquely human. Instead, they may be found in a somewhat modified form in humans, specific to the biological and environmental niche of *homo sapiens*. Following this, phylogenetically consistent traits related to the realm of politics, such as power asymmetries, found in humans and other animals, should be expected to form the first layer of the political cognition of any human political actor.

Social birds, carnivores, and primates reach consensus decisions either democratically, where all group members contribute to the decision, or by despotism, where a dominant leader coerces other members.³ In most primate species leaders tend to dominate others and are adept at forming coalitions suggesting that dominance and coalition building in humans is not primarily cultural.⁴

Humans are especially similar to chimpanzees and bonobos.⁵ In humans and non-human primates, dominant males offer unique services to subordinates such as support in negotiating rank, while subordinates offer common services in return (e.g., mostly grooming in non-human primates).⁶ In chacma bonobos for instance, reduced social time is linked with higher probability of group fission,⁷ speaking for the importance of grooming and coalition building in primates.

The political structure in many primate societies is based on funneling mates and resources to the higher-ranking members in a social hierarchy, who attain their rank based on physical prowess and coalition building skills.⁸ Power coalitions are found in many primates. In humans, power coalitions amount to moral

³ Andrew King et al., “Dominance and affiliation mediate despotism in a social primate”. *Current Biology*, Vol 18, Issue 23 (2008): 1833-1838.

⁴ Herbert Gintis et al., “Zoon Politikon: The evolutionary origins of human political systems”, *Current Anthropology* Vol. 56, No. 3 (2015).

⁵ Gintis et al., Zoon politikon.

⁶ Bernard Chapais, “Competence and the evolutionary origins of status and power in humans”, *Human Nature* (2015), 26: 161-183.

⁷ Andrew King et al., “Dominance and affiliation”.

⁸ Herbert Gintis et al., “Zoon Politikon”.

communities. Humans and other great apes live and forage in territorially oriented groups. There is status rivalry and competition, and there are political coalitions in humans, bonobos, and chimpanzees.⁹

Politics has been historically dominated by male coalitions, which holds true for the ethnographic record, as well as for non-human primates. The tendency of human males to engage in coalitional aggression is a cross-cultural and historical constant, and is sometimes considered a human universal.¹⁰ For instance, there is no significant difference between chimpanzees and bonobos in the percentage of male conflicts that involved coalition formation,¹¹ and most coalitional aggression in humans is also restricted to males.

In an environment characterized by conflict and scarcity, humans think social interactions in terms of coalitions.¹² As a result, humans have automatic ingroup/outgroup biases due to our innate proclivity toward coalitional aggression which we share with most social primates. These biases are linked with positive and negative affect respectively and have been also observed in rhesus macaques.¹³

In non-human primates, dominance depends on physical leverage. This was most likely a trait also found in the last common ancestor of humans and chimpanzees. Here, dominance asymmetries are pronounced. However, during a later stage of hominin history, with the emergence of cumulative culture in humans and the multiplication of sources of status (e.g., invention of tools and crafts), humans reversed this trend. The invention of weapons has considerably backtracked primate-specific dominance patterns over mates and resources. As a result, there emerged a non-authoritarian leadership style with prestigious individuals managing to accrue more wealth and status on the one hand, and with levelling coalitions – power alliances between lower ranking males to overpower the despot – on the other.^{14 15 16}

⁹ Christopher Boehm, “Conflict and the evolution of social control”, *Journal of Consciousness studies*, 7 (2000): 79-101.

¹⁰ Melissa McDonald et al., “Evolution and the psychology of intergroup conflict: The male warrior hypothesis”, *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B*, 366 (2011): 1-10.

¹¹ Martin Surbeck et al., “Comparison of male conflict behavior in chimpanzees (*pan troglodytes*) and bonobos (*pan paniscus*), with specific regard to coalition and post-conflict behavior”, *American Journal of Primatology*, 79 (2017): e22641.

¹² Anthony Lopez et al., “States in mind: Evolution, coalitional psychology, and international politics”, *International Security*, Vol. 36, No. 2, (2011): 48-83.

¹³ Melisa McDonald et al., “Evolution”.

¹⁴ Sagar Pandit and van Schaik, “A model for leveling coalitions among primate males: Toward a theory of egalitarianism”, *Behavioral Ecology and Sociobiology*, 55 (2003): 161-168.

¹⁵ Bernard Chapais, “Competence”, 161-183.

¹⁶ Herbert Gintis et al., “Zoon politikon”.

Ancestral human hunter-gatherer politics was dominated by several cross-cutting features such that power was rather decentralized, there were privileged individuals with elevated status and special roles (such as initiating warfare, directing and coordinating foraging activities), all hierarchies were determined by power coalitions, and ambitious individuals teamed up with others to increase their status.¹⁷

Human societies differ from those of non-human primates in the way they extended kin relationships through the invention of in-laws. Extending kin through marriage alliances afforded humans a crucial tool for expanding ingroup coalitions, although cooperating on the basis of patrilineality towards coalitional aggression is a trait which humans also share with chimpanzees and spider monkeys.¹⁸

2.2. *The U-shaped Pattern of Human Political Evolution*

Most great apes exhibit marked male dominance hierarchies. These hierarchies are more similar to human middle-scale societies than to small-scale, egalitarian societies. In both middle-scale societies and most great apes there are regularized relations of subordination among adult males as well as systematic inequalities in access to resources. In this sense, the evolution of primate politics is *U-shaped*, starting off with non-human primate patterns of domination, passing through egalitarianism in small-scale hunter-gatherer societies, and returning to permanent submission and domination with middle-scale and large-scale human societies.^{19 20 21 22}

This *U-shaped* sequence of political evolution could be described by the following features. First there are evolutionarily older primate power asymmetries based on coercion and physical force. Then there are weapon-wielding, levelling coalitions of small-scale hunter-gatherers who manage to coordinate towards effective punishment by sharing among themselves the costs of punishment. This results in power decentralization and less pronounced power asymmetries.

¹⁷ Anthony Lopez et al., “States in mind”, 48-83.

¹⁸ Lars Rodseth et al., “The human community as primate society”, *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 32, (1991): 221-254.

¹⁹ Bruce Knauft, “Violence and sociality in human evolution”, *Current Anthropology*, Vol 32., No. 4 (1991): 391-428.

²⁰ Christopher Boehm, *Moral origins: The evolution of virtue, altruism, and shame*, Basic Books, 1st Edition (2012).

²¹ Bernard Chapais, “Competence”, 161-183.

²² Omar Eldakar et al., “Hypocrisy and corruption: How disparities in power shape the evolution of social control”, *Evolutionary Psychology, Special Issue: Evolution and Politics*, (2018): 1-12.

In small-scale egalitarian societies, leadership is mostly determined by competence in various domains. Small-scale leaders are largely competent and generous. When a leader ceases to meet expectations, they are dismissed. In such scenarios, leaders cannot monopolize the means of production, resources, weapons required to maintain power, as their position is granted and revoked by the community.²³ Hunter-gatherers deliberately restrict alpha dominance.²⁴

Because human culture is cumulative, there are higher instances of attraction for competent individuals. Competence in areas such as hunting, gathering, cooking, making tools, skilfully using tools, waging war, healing and subduing supernatural entities is variable and differentiated among members of a group. We are naturally attracted to competent individuals mirroring the primate dynamics of attraction for high-ranking individuals. Highly skilled individuals benefited from more privileges, received more deference, were admired to a greater extent and were imitated by others, and were more influential overall regardless of area of expertise.²⁵

There are two basic ways to the top of human hierarchies: through physical dominance and through prestige respectively.²⁶ Attraction for competent individuals likely emerged with cultural evolution when there was a selection pressure for differential skill sets, as opposed to the straightforward abilities required for physical domination found in most non-human primates. As a result, humans developed a tendency to be overly generous toward and to show deference to highly skilled individuals or experts who in turn have leverage over their followers.²⁷

In ancestral, small-scale societies, group success depended upon persuading and motivating followers to submit to a consensual decision. Such non-authoritarian leadership involved good linguistic command and

²³ Bernard Chapais, "Competence", 161-183.

²⁴ Christopher Boehm and Jessica Flack, "The emergence of simple and complex power structures through social niche construction", in *The Social Psychology of Power*, Eds. Ana Guinote and Theresa Vescio (The Guilford Press, New York, London 2010).

²⁵ Bernard Chapais, "Competence", 161-183.

²⁶ Joseph Henrich and Francisco Gil-White, "The evolution of prestige: freely conferred deference as a mechanism for enhancing the benefits of cultural transmission", *Evolution and Human Behavior*, Vol. 22, Issue 3, (2001): 165-196.

²⁷ Bernard Chapais, "Competence", 161-183.

skills of political coordination. These factors have likely undermined the evolutionary older strategy of dominating through physical force.²⁸

However, property and possessions increase with sedentariness and with increased socioeconomic complexity but tend to also lead to wealth inequality.²⁹ After prolonged periods of accumulating material wealth during the Holocene, a social hierarchy with strong authoritarian leadership was again sustainable. As societies grow to middle-scale, members hold rights over assets such as means of production (e.g., boats, beehives) and stored food. These societies are typically more stratified, and lineages and clans dominate the social order. Wealth accumulation helps dominants form powerful alliances and further monopolize resources. This favoured a return to the social order familiar to non-human primates based on pronounced dominance asymmetries.³⁰ Usually, when people live in chiefdoms or nation states, political life can be despotic.³¹

In middle-scale societies, chiefdoms, and tribes where owning property is possible (due to storing food and surplus production), male status hierarchies are more complex and foster conflicts as a result of competition for elevated status. This leads to increasing socioeconomic complexity.³² The underlying power dynamics of early middle-scale and large-scale societies were probably based on dominance, submissive signalling, contractual conceptualization of political roles, and assessments of group power and coalitions, that were already present to some extent in the last common ancestor of chimpanzees and modern humans.³³

2.3. *Evolution of political leadership in Oceania*

The evolution of hominin social and political stratification is best observed in island societies such as those of Oceania mainly because the geographical isolation specific to island living facilitates cultural and behavioural

²⁸ Herbert Gintis et al., “Zoon politikon”.

²⁹ Bruce Knauft, “Violence”, 391-428.

³⁰ Herbert Gintis et al., “Zoon politikon”.

³¹ Christopher Boehm, “Conflict”, 79-101.

³² Bruce Knauft, “Violence”, 391-428.

³³ Christopher Boehm and Jessica Flack, “The emergence”.

segregation.³⁴ Moreover, the ethnographic record from Oceania seems to reflect the *U-shaped* pattern of primate and hominin political evolution.

From the smallest societies (starting from 140 to 600 individuals) and up to societies on very large islands (around 100,000 inhabitants), leadership style evolved predictably according to a set pattern.

First, for islands with the smallest population, individual households managed their own supply while the chief's power was heavily circumscribed and if he or she attempted to overstep the boundaries of their authority, he or she would likely be either removed or killed. Here, power was actually sustained by a council of elders, whereas the role of the chief resided mainly in coordinating collective functioning.

Then, for islands with a population surrounding 1200, chiefs controlled the distribution and surplus production, while individual households were still self-sustaining. Chiefdoms represent an intermediary step between egalitarian small-scale societies and modern nation states.³⁵

Finally, for very large islands (100,000), chiefs presided over highly complex hierarchies and had absolute control of the land and its products, while household production was directly monitored by the chief. As opposed to the more egalitarian and bottom-up administration of small islands, larger islands were more bureaucratic and had top-down management of social relations and natural resources. Finally, as population numbers grow, leaders seek to improve power and prestige.³⁶

2.4. *Primate and hominin political psychology*

Modern human societies can become more despotic than any big ape community, but there is also a universally human tendency of restricting despotism sometimes described as an 'ancient egalitarian orientation'. This tendency is driven by our innate dislike for being dominated, and it is mirrored in today's democracies by the habit of creating institutional checks and balances.³⁷

³⁴ Stephen Younger, "Leadership in small societies", *Journal of Artificial Societies and Social Simulation*, 13 (3):5.

³⁵ Stephen Younger, "Leadership".

³⁶ Stephen Younger, "Leadership".

³⁷ Christopher Boehm and Jessica Flack, "The emergence".

As a result of hominin political evolution, humans became innately disposed to vie for power and prestige. However, this trait suggests some phylogenetic consistency as well since it is also found in chickens³⁸. By the Late Palaeolithic, egalitarianism had plausibly emerged after considerable selection for an earlier tendency to dominate together with a later dislike for being dominated.³⁹ The human political actor can therefore be described as having both an egalitarian orientation as well as despotic reflexes.⁴⁰

Humans have a deep seeded drive to strive for power and prestige, as well as having two main pathways for attaining this outcome: through domination on the one hand, and expertise or dependence-based power on the other. Passive influence and obedience to authority may stem from the cooperation between experts and followers and reflect the asymmetries of dependence on each other.⁴¹

Human psychology may have inherited the emotion of pride from the primate domination motivation, and pride is a prime motivator for driving performance in both aggressive and non-aggressive contests. Pride motivates status competition in any competitive arena (e.g., battles, games). In humans, pride motivates one's increase in skill and the use of this competence for pro-social aims.⁴²

In democracies, this dual dimension of the motivation of pride and generosity in political hopefuls is mirrored by the paradox that one must have ambition and struggle through hierarchy all the way to the top but then discard this competitive ambition and focus on serving the good of the many by the best of one's abilities.⁴³

Humans have ancient motivations to strive for political success and they do so in predictable ways. Moreover, predictably recurring patterns of power asymmetries observed in primate and hominin history can help place political acts of today in light of our evolutionary past, especially in cases when those patterns are also observed in the current political arena. Working toward the profile of a right-wing populist leader, I

³⁸ Christopher Boehm, "Conflict", 79-101.

³⁹ Christopher Boehm and Jessica Flack, "The emergence".

⁴⁰ Christopher Boehm and Jessica Flack, "The emergence".

⁴¹ Bernard Chapais, "Competence", 161-183.

⁴² Bernard Chapais, "Competence", 161-183.

⁴³ Eric Weber, "Democratic political leadership", *Political and Civic Leadership: A reference handbook*, 105-110.

propose that cognitive tendencies and constraints familiar to human and non-human primate power relations come to the fore in right-wing populist leaders today.

Our ancestral motivations however make up only one side of the profile of human political cognition. They are most likely accompanied by the natural tendencies and cognitive biases belonging to the human social psychology of power and corruption. The following section explores common themes of power and corruption that are likely found in settings of political competition, and that are likely to accompany ancestral political motivations in right-wing populists.

3. Power and Corruption

The drive for power is a basic human characteristic albeit varying in both level and expression. Not all people want power, and there are different kinds of power such as power through coercion and dominance, power through influence on decision makers (i.e., power ‘behind the throne’), and there is also power through prestige. However, all types of power seeking can be measured by power motivation psychometrics. People scoring high on power motivation seek prestige and influence, attempt to define agendas, and are adept at building coalitions and a base of followers.⁴⁴

There is corruption in humans and wasps, and corrupt policing is present in ants and social wasps, as well as in humans. In wasps, the queen lays eggs but workers do not. Some workers police other workers to ensure no one else lays eggs. Transgressors are punished by being attacked and by having their eggs removed from the stoop. But policing workers may act corruptly by laying eggs themselves. Policing workers often have more power and better fighting skills, while others are better at disguising their defection.^{45 46}

Mathematical simulations have shown that corruption is endemic to social evolution, and that transparency is a major factor in reducing corruption.⁴⁷ Small power asymmetries promote limited corruption,

⁴⁴ David Winter, “Power in person: Exploring the motivational underground of power”.

⁴⁵ Francisco Ubeda and Edgar Duenez-Guzman, “Power and corruption”, *Evolution*, 65 (4) (2010): 1127-1139.

⁴⁶ Omar Eldakar et al., “Hypocrisy”, 1-12.

⁴⁷ Joung-Hun Lee et al. “Social evolution leads to persistent corruption“, *Proceedings of the National Academy of the United States of America*, 116 (27) (2019): 13276-13281.

whereas large power asymmetries promote absolute corruption.⁴⁸ Societies with high corruption also have high levels of poverty, low social mobility, dysfunctional institutions, low trust in government, and overall lower living standards.⁴⁹

Individuals who tend to abuse entrusted power have been described as having weak morality and a ‘primitive moral thinking’, which translates into valuing personal loyalty over formal rules and into failing to distinguish between personal and organizational goals.⁵⁰

Individuals are on average more likely to cheat when they see others cheating⁵¹ and they are more likely to act corruptly when they stand to gain, if they perceive that corruption will only cause indirect harm, and when there is low probability of detection. Optimism bias – assuming bad things happen to other people and that the future will hold rather positive experiences for oneself – may lead people engaged in corruption to underestimate the likelihood of detection.⁵²

Power holders are more likely to engage in corruption. They tend to be risk acceptant, seek rewards, experience less guilt and embarrassment, and to feel less empathy for others and to instrumentalize others to serve their goals.⁵³ Incentives to act corruptly are greater with low probability of detection, a low cost of punishment, and high benefit for engaging in corruption. Corruption tends to be lower with high accountability. Corruption is higher when actors have discretion in operating with resources destined for public or organizational aims which are available under an easily appropriable form.⁵⁴

Holding power seems to change cognitive processing to the extent of making people behave more unethically.⁵⁵ Power corrupts and power holders are more selfish. They are also more risk seeking, and attentive to rewards. They experience less guilt and embarrassment and display more stereotypical views of

⁴⁸ Francisco Ubeda and Edgar Duenez-Guzman, “Power”, 1127-1139.

⁴⁹ Marina Zaloznaya, “The social psychology of corruption: Why it does not exist and why it should”, *Sociology Compass*, 8/2 (2014): 187-202.

⁵⁰ Marina Zaloznaya, “The social psychology”, 187-202.

⁵¹ Marina Zaloznaya, “The social psychology”, 187-202.

⁵² Kendra Dupuy and Siri Neset, “The cognitive psychology of corruption: Micro-level explanations for unethical behaviour”, *U4*, Issue 2 (2018).

⁵³ Kendra Dupuy and Siri Neset, “The cognitive”.

⁵⁴ Seini O’Connor and Ronald Fischer, “Predicting societal corruption across time: Values, wealth, or institutions?”, *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 43 (4) (2012): 644-659.

⁵⁵ Kendra Dupuy and Siri Neset, “The cognitive”.

those around them. Individuals primed with high-power motives (i.e., mind set) struggle to take others' perspectives into account.^{56 57}

Human societies have commonly transitioned from autocratic to democratic, or from Mafia leadership to government,⁵⁸ a trend that seems to be reversed by right-wing populist leaders who appear to strive for more autocratic forms of government.⁵⁹ I propose that several if not all of the relevant traits related to power and corruption, as well as many of the primate and hominin patterns of leadership and psychological motivations guiding the quest for power and prestige are readily observable in right-wing populist leaders and their administrations.

A common feature of right-wing populist leaders is that they tend to circumvent institutional checks and balances and attempt to supplant or control the judiciary, opposition, and media by installing members of their coalition in key positions. This pattern is also found in mafia states, and the underlying motivations appear to be similar to those in primate and human middle scale societies.

Previously, I mentioned what psychological motivations political actors are likely to possess in their pursuit of power and prestige. Next, I will go through the specific cognitive mechanisms that are likely activated in their audience by the right-wing populist rhetoric of political leaders seeking to enhance their power.

4. Cognition and Right-wing Populism

Due to our individual and personality differences we are variably attuned to seeking political power and elected office, and many of us are lacking sufficient motivation for pursuing political careers. On the other

⁵⁶ Francis Flynn, "Power as charismatic leadership: A significant opportunity (and a modest proposal) for social psychology research". In (eds.) A. Guinote and T. Vescio, *The social psychology of power*; (2010): 284-309.

⁵⁷ Fang Wang and Xunwei Sun, „Absolute power leads to absolute corruption? Impact of power on corruption depending on the concepts of power one holds”, *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 46 (2016): 77-89.

⁵⁸ Omar Eldakar et al., "Hypocrisy", 1-12.

⁵⁹ Ruth Wodak, "Analysing the micropolitics of the populist far right in the 'post-shame era'". In (eds) Bevelander P. and Wodak R. *Europe at the Crossroads: Confronting populist, nationalist, and global challenges* (Nordic Academic Press, Sweden, 2019, 63-93.

hand, it is fair to assume that those of us who do seek political power are also likely to be driven by the evolutionary motivations of our universally human political psychology. This is because, by and large, our political-cognitive biases and intuitions activate automatically and motivate our actions, as a result of past selection pressures operating on the human brain. Which is to say that, even if consciously registered and, moreover, deliberately contradicted by our reasoning, these psychological motivations, cognitive intuitions and biases are unavoidably present. Then, it is not so much a question of whether we have them or not but rather of how we can best manage to handle their activation.

Much research in the cognitive sciences points to a rather dim view of rationality. Here, reason seems first and foremost to operate as post-hoc rationalization of prior intuitions than as a disinterested philosophical enquirer or referee, supposed to carefully work its way through premises toward a conclusion.⁶⁰ Therefore, any theory aiming to describe the cognitive profile of a political leader should include these biases and motivations in order to best inform any type of description or prediction of human political behaviour it attempts to provide.

But how can these ancient motivations, intuitions, and biases be identified in the political conduct of right-wing populist leaders today? And why should right-wing populists reflect human intuitive political psychology better than other political actors? I propose that one relevant feature of intuitive processing that can be observed in right-wing populism is highlighted by populists' common usage of simple narratives such as conspiracy theories or Manichean worldviews. In the remainder of the paper, I will explore the links between ancient political cognition on the one hand, and the intuitive processing specific to right-wing populist rhetoric on the other, with the aim to lay out an argument for their connection.

There seems to be a connection between increased reliance on conspiracy theories in governance and the move towards more autocratic, totalitarian forms of government. Right-wing populist leaders promote conspiracy theories (oftentimes bearing antisemitic undertones) surrounding a fabricated elite supposedly conspiring with salient minorities against the ordinary people. Populists use this narrative to justify the shift

⁶⁰ Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber, *The enigma of reason* (Harvard University Press, April 17, 2017).

towards a more despotic and autocratic leadership style, as well as the dismantling of institutional checks and balances.⁶¹

When corruption and nepotism come naturally but are officially unaccepted, they operate underground. If power holders believe that they will not be held accountable, they are more likely to act corruptly.⁶² Curtailing corruption in office holders requires transparency and oversight but right-wing populists manage to entice anti-system, anti-mainstream sentiment in their followers, thusly acquiring invested authority to engage negatively with and even to subvert institutional checks and balances. They manage to portray democratic institutions as conspiring against the people and as working in favour of so-called “corrupt elites”, therefore justifying the antagonization of opposition members or members of the judiciary and other democratic institutions. And this is likely to work if they are successful in triggering our coalitional psychology intuitions.

4.1. *Coalitional psychology*

Right-wing populist leaders portray intergroup relations in terms of competition between rival coalitions for available resources. In doing so, they successfully trigger our evolved intuitions of zero-sum dynamics likely present in the ancestral environment of our hunter-gatherer ancestors where available resources were limited and where outgroups contending for them most likely impeded the survival of the ingroup. In this scenario, a win for the outgroup meant a loss for the ingroup. As a result, humans evolved a coalitional psychology aimed at addressing scenarios of intergroup competition and to motivate appropriate action.

Our coalitional intuitions automatically map onto markers of cultural or ethnic groups and promote behaviour favouring the ingroup and opposing the outgroup. In this case, depicting migrants as salient outgroups successfully competing for resources triggers our coalitional intuitions that resources are limited,

⁶¹ Ruth Wodak, “Analysing”, 63-93.

⁶² Kendra Dupuy and Siri Neset, “The cognitive”.

which in turn motivate anti-immigrant attitudes, especially when populists and the media present cues that the economy is in dire straits and migrants are taking advantage of the state.^{63 64 65}

Perceiving outgroups as competing for domestic resources automatically triggers outgroup bias and, in case of right-wing populism, negative sentiments towards migrants, minorities, and the perceived elite – all of which populists aptly depict as competing outgroups. Conspiracy theories often represent intergroup dynamics in a simplified way which fits well with typically-populist Manichean representations of the social environment as a competitive arena between different groups. This depiction is often marked by a hostile opposition between “us” (i.e., the good people) and “them” (i.e., the corrupt elite and allegedly hostile outgroups).^{66 67}

5. Argument

5.1. *Right-wing populists bank on intuitive worldviews*

I propose that primate motivations and domination patterns are best expressed in right-wing populist leaders relative to other political actors. Primate domination dynamics are impervious to political etiquette. Once conventional norms of the political dialogue are suspended, “anything goes”.⁶⁸

Political etiquette itself is based on the peculiarities of the cultural evolution of political systems, and in the case of liberal democracies, on institutional checks and balances, and on the mutual understanding of the authority and responsibilities of state institutions. Most Western democracies have a history of perfecting democratic institutions the complex workings of which oftentimes can seem too technical for the average understanding of untrained voters and may even appear alien to them.

⁶³ Victoria Esses et al., “Intergroup competition and attitudes toward immigrants and immigration: An instrumental model of group conflict”, *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 54, No. 4 (1998): 699-724.

⁶⁴ Anthony Lopez et al., “States in mind”, 48-83.

⁶⁵ Pascal Boyer and Michael Petersen, “Folk-economic beliefs: An evolutionary cognitive model”, *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, Vol. 41 (2018): e158.

⁶⁶ Paul Taggart, “Populism in Western Europe“. In Taggart R., Espejo P., and Ostiguy (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* (Oxford University Press, 2017, 248-263).

⁶⁷ Eirikur Bergmann, *Conspiracy & populism: The politics of misinformation* (Palgrave Macmillan, Switzerland, 2018).

⁶⁸ Ruth Wodak, “Analysing”, 63-93.

Many voters do not have the time to browse through the dense platforms of political parties, instead relying on shortcuts, heuristics and intuitions when choosing whom to vote for. For instance, when choosing a political leader, many rely on universal cues of competence and warmth. Moreover, in threatening environments people tend to choose more masculine leaders and untrustworthiness is valued in wartime scenarios, while trustworthy leaders are valued in cooperative contexts.⁶⁹

Human minds contain numerous intuitions and mental heuristics that inform political decision making and voting options. For instance, it has been proposed with supporting evidence that heuristics designed to track coalitions inform modern opinions on race relations⁷⁰, or that heuristics designed for pathogen avoidance inform policy opinions about sex and outgroups.^{71 72}

Other intuitions commonly involved in politics and morality relate to fairness in cooperation, collaboration, and resource distribution. Such intuitions regulate and motivate behaviour. For instance, when an unequitable trade happens, we get the intuition that we are being cheated. Similarly, in a cooperative venture between two individuals involved in a foraging scenario, when one of them provides all the work and effort while the other freerides, and the spoils are then divided up equally between the two, we get the intuition of an unfair distribution of foraged goods.⁷³

In politics, the party heuristics is a learned shortcut which is reliable because political parties are designed in a way that they occupy a predetermined position on the ideological spectrum, with little movement away from the designated spot. People choose parties based on their ideological worldviews because they tend to agree more or less substantially with the party's platform.⁷⁴

⁶⁹ Lou Safra et al., "Why would anyone elect a narcissistic untrustworthy leader?", Working paper (2020).

⁷⁰ Robert Kurzban et al., "Can race be erased? Coalitional computation and social categorization", *PNAS*, 98 (26) (2001): 15387-15392.

⁷¹ Jason Faulkner et al., "Evolved disease-avoidance mechanisms and contemporary xenophobic attitudes", *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, Vol. 7(4) (2004): 333-353.

⁷² Inbar et al., "Disgust sensitivity predicts intuitive disapproval of gays", *Emotion*, 9(3) (2009): 435-439.

⁷³ Nicolas Baumard et al., "A mutualistic approach to morality: The evolution of fairness by partner choice", *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, Vol. 36, Issue 1, (2013): 59-78.

⁷⁴ Paul Sniderman and John Bullock, "A consistency theory of public opinion and political choice: The hypothesis of menu dependence". In S. Willem and Paul Sniderman (eds) *Studies in Public Opinion: Attitudes, Nonattitudes, Measurement Error, and Change*, (Princeton University Press; Princeton and Oxford, 2004): 337-354.

The act of judging deservingness of welfare recipients activates automatic inferences evolved for help-giving scenarios specific of ancestral small-scale hunter-gatherer societies. These inferences are automatic, rapid, and get activated by a very narrow set of input conditions.⁷⁵ For instance, people routinely judge the welfare deservingness of target individuals by intuitively and automatically computing cues of effort and bad luck which motivate support for welfare programs. Conversely, cues of laziness and cheating promote the wish to restrict welfare for target individuals, and can even activate the desire to deny welfare to migrants which are oftentimes perceived as outgroups that are lazy or cheating.⁷⁶

For instance, right-wing populists portray migrants as dangerous outgroups taking over the limited resources available to the ingroup, despite the fact that in today's post-industrial societies no amount of migration limits access to resources, migration does not affect negatively the local economy, and resources are not really limited in present-day Western economies.^{77 78 79}

Right-wing populists, banking on the negative portrayal of migrants in the media, manage to get their message across by designating migrant outgroups as lazy and cheating, by successfully activating our ancestral intuitions of deservingness, coalition building and our outgroup biases, as well as our intuitions of fairness in resource distribution. All these intuitions “feel” right and make right-wing populist rhetoric seem plausible. This is because when certain cultural stimuli such as anti-immigrant depictions in the media match our intuitive inferences such as those of our coalitional psychology, we experience this event phenomenologically as a cognitive ‘feeling’.⁸⁰

Intuitions, heuristics, and biases are cognitive processes or inferences characterized by an automatic, domain-specific, and computationally effortless mode of processing. The output of such inferences we experience as intuitions. An intuition is the phenomenological sensation that we habitually experience as

⁷⁵ Michael Petersen, “Social welfare as small-scale help: Evolutionary psychology and the deservingness heuristic”, *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 56, No. 1 (2012): 1-16.

⁷⁶ Michael Petersen, “Social welfare”, 1-16.

⁷⁷ Jack Citrin et al., “Public opinion toward immigration reform: The role of economic motivations”, *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 59, No. 3 (1997).

⁷⁸ Noel Gaston and Gulasekaran Rajaguru, “International migration and the welfare state revisited”, *European Journal of Political Economy*, Vol. 29, (2013): 90-101.

⁷⁹ Pascal Boyer and Michael Petersen, “Folk-economic”, e158.

⁸⁰ Pascal Boyer, *Religion explained: The evolutionary origins of religious thought* (Basic Books, 2001).

‘popping up in mind’ without being ourselves aware of the specific algorithms our brain deployed in order to process the content that we experience, nor are we introspectively aware of the domain-specific input conditions necessary to activate these automatic inferences. As described above, when we observe an unequitable outcome in any cooperative venture, we automatically experience the intuition of unfairness regarding the affected party. From an evolutionary perspective and everything else being equal, intuitions are there to motivate adaptive behaviour.^{81 82}

Intuitive content is plausible because it caters to our intuitions, whereas expertise that relies on statistical constructs or mathematical models is highly counterintuitive. Take for instance the scientifically accurate notion that no physical body actually touches another, as there is empty space between atoms, in opposition to our intuitions of physicality telling us that two colliding solids actually do touch one another. Other ontological domains such as the history of evolutionary processes and the dynamics of complex systems similarly fall outside the scope of our ordinary intuitions.

On the other hand, most religious content is largely intuitive and therefore culturally successful, emerging in unrelated cultures in roughly the same shape, because it activates our same intuitions. Human culture generally mirrors human universal cognitive constraints.

The cultural success of an idea can be characterized by high transmission rates and low transmission cost.⁸³ For instance, “the golden rule” of most large scale religions – *do unto others what you would have them do unto you* - is cognitively attractive and easy remembered because it activates our intuitions of reciprocity and equity in collaboration and cooperation, the cornerstones of our intuitive sense of fairness.⁸⁴ On the other hand, calculus can be pretty difficult to grasp because it is counterintuitive and requires more effort to process and understand, as well as requiring considerable institutional support for transmission to be possible. Due to

⁸¹ Robert Kurzban, *Why everyone (else) is a hypocrite: evolution of the modular mind*(Princeton University Press, 2010).

⁸² Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber, “The enigma”.

⁸³ Thom Scott-Phillips et al., “Four misunderstandings about cultural attraction”, *Evolutionary Anthropology: Issues, News, and Reviews*, Vol. 27, Issue 4 (2018).

⁸⁴ Nicolas Baumard and Pascal Boyer, “Explaining moral religions”, *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, Vol. 17, No. 6 (2013): 272-280.

our intuitive psychology, we arrive sooner and easier at religious and supernatural ideas than we are able to grasp the rules of calculus and to conduct mathematical operations.⁸⁵

Populist leaders appeal to voters' intuitive worldviews and empower their confidence in their intuitions and gut feelings, which at times contradict expert opinion. Populist actors are then free to reject the status quo and the discursive mainstream, to reject expertise, and, by depicting the political arena as fundamentally divided between the good people and their evil enemies, they manage to trigger in their audience ancient intuitions of intergroup competition.

The common association between a scientific understanding and complex methodology, especially in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) but also in the social sciences and psychology, which use statistics and modelling, can backfire when it is confronted with our everyday intuitions. This is because scientific methods may reveal trends in the environment that go against our intuitions. In liberal democracies with strong educational systems, this tension is commonly resolved by the trust we normally place in the sciences and their methods, and in the power of replicability that such methods convey.

Additionally, scientific understanding has spurred modern technologies which changed our lives for the better. On the other hand, authoritative or charismatic figures telling us what our intuitions want to hear, can, and, in case of right-wing populist actors, commonly do clash with our faith in expertise. It is therefore no accident that most populists are not only anti-establishment, but also anti-expertise. They gain leverage over experts as they feed our intuitions with highly intuitive and therefore attractive, although empirically and epistemically wrong content.

This raises the question of how right-wing populist leaders manage to receive support from their followers for derogating experts. Considering that our evolved cognition includes an attraction for skilled individuals, there are two possible ways to relate to experts. First, when experts seem to contradict our intuitions, they are dismissed. And second, when they reinforce our intuitions, they are largely accepted. This

⁸⁵ Helen De Cruz and Johan De Smedt, "The role of intuitive ontologies in scientific understanding – the case of human evolution", *Biology & Philosophy*, 22 (2007): 351-368.

is because our decisions are mostly guided by cognitive intuitions and heuristics which sometimes use imprecise cues of activation. But why do our intuitions suffer from imprecise activation?

Guided by cost-effectiveness and because building sophisticated cognitive systems is genetically costly, natural selection favoured the emergence of cognitive computations that are as pragmatic and reliable as possible, in order to meet biological fitness expectations such as survival and reproduction, without being too complex. Animal cognition did not evolve for the purposes of scientifically understanding the world, but to afford organisms the ability to successfully navigate their environments.⁸⁶

To this end, most cognitive mechanisms have minimal input conditions which can lead to the false activation of said mechanisms once a physically or formally similar, but essentially different stimuli is perceived. For instance, mimicry in nature evolved to fool prey-detection mechanism. This is the case with the hoverfly which evolved yellow stripes that gave it a survival advantage over other flies as it appeared dangerous to predators.⁸⁷

Once there emerged cognitive mechanisms or shortcuts that were successful in solving specific adaptive problems, selection stopped operating on them. This means that they retain the same input conditions for activation that had originally configured them in the environment of evolutionary adaptedness, e.g., the ancestral environment wherein they evolved.⁸⁸ This is likely the reason why specific environmental cues that were relevant during the ancestral environment are still able to activate the same ancestral coalitional intuitions, which for instance can prompt an inaccurate understanding of the impact of immigration on local economies today.

However, the extent to which individuals are susceptible to having their intuitions triggered in support of intuitively appealing cultural content such as right-wing populism is moderated by individual variation in cognitive or thinking style. Research in cognitive psychology has shown that intuitive processing and an intuitive thinking style predict right-wing and conservative attitudes and beliefs, supernatural beliefs,

⁸⁶ Jerome Barkow et al., *The adapted mind: Evolutionary psychology and the generation of culture*(Oxford University Press, 1992).

⁸⁷ Dan Sperber and Lawrence Hirschfeld, "The cognitive foundations of stability and diversity", *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, Vol. 8, Issue 1 (2004): 40-46.

⁸⁸ Richard Samuels, "Massive modularity". In E. Margolis, R. Samuels, and S. Stich (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Cognitive Science*(Oxford University Press; Reprint edition, August 1, 2017).

belief in conspiracy theories and pseudoscience. In contrast, such beliefs are negatively associated with an analytic, or consequentialist thinking style.^{89 90 91 92} This suggests that right-wing populism is likely to best resonate with intuitive processing.

Let us consider another example of right-wing populism appealing to intuitions for political gain. Ahead of the 2016 Brexit referendum, the winning side Vote Leave employed slogans that activated our intuitions of fairness and intergroup competition. They used slogans such as ‘take back control’ and ‘£350 million for the NHS’, alleging that the European Union was treating Britain unfairly and that it was unfairly claiming British resources. Additionally, the ‘£350 million’ claim, although inaccurate and eventually debunked, made intuitive sense because it activated our intuitions about rough amounts and interchangeable quantities coming out of our naïve understanding of physicality, as well as triggering our zero-sum intuitions of limited resource availability.⁹³

Right-wing populists therefore manage to rally popular support for derogating experts by banking on voters’ intuitions. For instance, the ‘£350 million’ claim was intuitive, expert opinion debunking it was not. However, because of our natural attraction towards skilled individuals and experts, right-wing populists need to appear either skilful or expert in any one domain of activity. This is possible because most likely our heuristics for identifying experts include among the input conditions for activation cues of success.

Celebrities such as singers, actors, or athletes are usually associated with high levels of skill. But successful individuals like United States president Donald Trump, or celebrities such as reality show stars the Kardashians, may also activate our tendency to intuitively read success as a cue for skill. Charismatic figures are akin to celebrities in that both evoke success. In the case of Trump, a famous yet factually inaccurate

⁸⁹ Marjaana Lindeman and Aarnio Kia, “Paranormal beliefs: Their dimensionality and correlates”, *European Journal of Personality*, 20 (2006): 585-602.

⁹⁰ Gordon Pennycook et al., “Analytic cognitive style predicts religious and paranormal belief”, *Cognition*, Vol. 123, Issue 3 (2012): 335-346.

⁹¹ Scott Eidelman et al., “Low-effort thought promotes political conservatism”, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 38(6) (2012): 808-820.

⁹² Jared Piazza and Paulo Sousa, “Religiosity, political orientation, and consequentialist moral thinking”, *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, Vol. 5(3) (2014): 334-342.

⁹³ Bogdan Ianosev and Osman Sahin, “Can human evolution help us understand support for populist movements?”, *Political Insight* (September 4, 2020): 26-29.

anecdote depicts him as a successful person who started off by borrowing 1million dollars from his father and ended up building a personal empire.⁹⁴

A charismatic leader who appears successful is sufficient to activate the intuition of expertise. Right-wing populist leaders such as Trump reinforce the intuitive worldviews of their voters and function as authority for their voters' intuitive beliefs. One such belief is for instance that there are too many ethnically diverse migrants taking away resources from the ingroup. As a result, Trump supporters defer to his tweets which in turn legitimize even radical views, as right-wing populists habitually deploy 'calculated ambivalence', i.e., vague statements that carry different meanings for different audiences. On the other hand, when expert opinion contradicts our intuitive beliefs, we tend to dismiss expertise. This is evident in instances of pseudoscientific beliefs such as that vaccines cause autism, or that the Coronavirus Covid-19 is caused by 5G network masts. In these instances, just as with conspiracy theories, believers cling onto an authoritative figure (e.g., discredited scientist) who legitimizes their beliefs⁹⁵ but who also inevitably contradicts expert consensus.

Finally, new media and social media technologies add to the 'well-oiled' machine of conspiracist right-wing populism by facilitating an instant widespread transmission of intuitive content outside of fact checking or expertise.⁹⁶

5.2. *Shamelessness and right-wing populism*

As long as right-wing populists receive voter support by presenting cognitively attractive content, populist leaders have leeway to reject established rules of political debate. This allows them to express primate dominance motivations without incurring any cost on their reputation. Reputational concerns have been

⁹⁴ Glenn Kessler, "Fact check: Trump's claim that he built his company with \$1 million loan", *The Washington Post* (2016). Available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2016/live-updates/general-election/real-time-fact-checking-and-analysis-of-the-final-2016-presidential-debate/fact-check-trumps-claim-that-he-built-his-company-with-1-million-loan/> (Accessed 01/10/2020).

⁹⁵ Rob Brotherton, *Suspicious minds: Why we believe conspiracy theories* (Bloomsbury Sigma, 2015).

⁹⁶ Bogdan Ianosev and Osman Sahin, "Can human evolution", 26-29.

paramount in small-scale societies, and ancestral humans were dependent on others for survival, which led to a selection pressure for maintaining a good reputation.⁹⁷ Populists reinforce the fears and intuitions of their voters and receive their support, and furthermore manage to link political etiquette to the corrupt elite. This affords populist leaders the opportunity to antagonize established political norms without any cost to their reputation.

The world is observing an evident shift towards the political right and towards so-called ‘illiberal democracy’ marked by more nativist mythologies and depleted of tolerance for diversity and minorities. Whereas liberal democracy involves the respect for and the maintenance of institutional checks and balances designed to protect society from abuses of power, illiberal democracies limit the freedoms of their citizen and the independence of checks and balances. Illiberal leaders in Hungary or Poland have curtailed freedom of the press, reformed the electoral systems in ways that benefit the ruling party or coalition, and have undermined the independence of the judiciary. Here, the political opposition is harassed, spied on, and at times imprisoned. In illiberal democracies, illiberalism, authoritarianism and populism tend to overlap. The move towards illiberalism can be observed today in Hungary, Poland but also Austria, the UK, Italy, Brazil and India, among others.⁹⁸

The possibility for political dialogue is disabled as illiberal leaders in Hungary and Poland reject the established rules for dialogue as political language games. Polish populists took over the judiciary in defiance of the Polish Constitution while ‘dressing it up’ as ‘beneficial’ reform. In doing this, populists in government reject the political ground of dialogue by signalling that conventions of the open society do not apply to them.⁹⁹

The rejection of conventions is possible due to a ‘digital and narcissistic post-shame era’.¹⁰⁰ This is reflected by populists’ digital demagogy and shameless anti-politics, and non-compliant behaviour, a discourse that undermines democratic institutions. Here, politics turns into reality TV by including shamelessness, lies,

⁹⁷ Nicolas Baumard et al., “A mutualistic approach”, 59-78.

⁹⁸ Ruth Wodak, “Analysing”, 63-93.

⁹⁹ Ruth Wodak, “Analysing”, 63-93.

¹⁰⁰ Ruth Wodak, “Analysing”, 66.

and defamation. This straightforward shamelessness includes ‘bad manners’ such as insults, eristic argumentation (violating dialogue norms), intentional racist, sexist, homophobic, or antisemitic remarks or implications (sometimes acting as dog-whistle, legitimizing far right and extremist views for the sake of gaining votes). When challenged for their extremist views, right-wing populists usually deny responsibility by claiming that they were misunderstood.¹⁰¹

The rejection of reasoned dialogue, of agreed norms, and of established conventions undermines the political debate and paves the way for illiberalism and authoritarianism. It also legitimizes antagonistic but highly intuitive representations of migrants and supra-national institutions such as the EU as dangerous outgroups.¹⁰²

Right-wing populists’ generic claim that they only say out loud what many people are actually thinking gains appeal precisely because voters are exposed to cultural representations that activate their intuitions, leading them for instance to oppose rights for migrants as a result of the activation of their intergroup competition and zero-sum coalitional intuitions. To a certain extent the claim is correct, opposition to immigration is what many people think but only inasmuch as populists manage to trigger their voters’ coalitional intuitions. The intuition that a salient and industrious outgroup can take over the ingroup’s resources was an adaptive trait in the ancestral environment where rival tribes occupying a food patch would have depleted the resources and endangered the survival of the ingroup. These intuitions evolved to promote survival, while minimal input conditions such as the presence of a prosperous salient outgroup (e.g. thriving migrants), or an outgroup depicted as cheating (e.g. lazy migrants), as is frequently featured in the media, accompanied by cues of an unfavourable environment (e.g. economy in dire straits) are sufficient to activate them. Once the intuitions are triggered, people experience the thought that the outgroup is encroaching on their welfare and wellbeing, which in turn promotes anti-immigrant attitudes.^{103 104}

¹⁰¹ Ruth Wodak, “Analysing”, 63-93.

¹⁰² Ruth Wodak, “Analysing”, 63-93.

¹⁰³ Victoria Esses et al., “Intergroup competition”, 699-724.

¹⁰⁴ Pascal Boyer and Michael Petersen, “Folk-economic”, e158.

The received opinion that migrants are taking away jobs and straining the welfare state, which is intuitively appealing given the abundance of cultural representations depicting migrants as dangerous outgroups, is more compelling than any statistical study showing the lack of any supposed negative impact of migrants on local economies. This is because intuitions have precedence over reasoning due to their motivational component. Intuitions, emotions, and reason are placed on a cognitive continuum to which the brain gives differentiated salience. In this sense, intuitions are the emotions of reason, their activation promotes action. On the other hand, considering all available evidence before acting is associated with ‘cold’ consequentialist reasoning.

Consequentialist reasoning could in principle promote action that goes against our intuitions, in the case that our intuitions are mistaken, but only insofar as one is prepared to override intuitive responses and to plan a course of action based not on the cognitive feeling that arises in awareness as a result of the activation of said intuitions but on the likely consequences of one’s actions.¹⁰⁵ In this case, the intuition that migrants are dangerous outgroups could be overridden by the rational realization that they are indeed no such thing, just as expertise suggests. Unfortunately, many people cannot afford the luxury to dedicate their time and resources to fighting off their own questionable intuitions, especially since they believe it is not their intuitions that are responsible for their decisions, as is the case most of the time, but their reasoning.

5.3. *Category violation and populist conspiracies*

The special feature of right-wing populist discourse that lends itself best to intuitive processing has to do with the way simple stories resonate with our intuitions. And increased variation on a theme conveyed through simple stories targeting specific intuitions is especially well suited to influence voter opinion. Just as the ‘£350 million for the NHS’ claim activates our intuitive understanding of physicality or folk physics, the intuitive understanding of physical properties leads us to believe that a bigger rock creates larger ripples. This plays into our ‘proportionality bias’, coming from the psychology of conspiracy theories, which promotes the belief

¹⁰⁵ Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber, *The enigma*.

that a big outcome (e.g., the assassination of a US president) is probably caused by a big event (e.g., a huge conspiracy). On the other hand, a smaller cause (e.g., an individual acting alone) is seen as less likely to plausibly cause a big event.¹⁰⁶ The pro-Brexit referendum campaign, for instance, was able to activate several intuitions using largely the same theme or content but rehashed in various ways and presented repeatedly to their audience. Voters were therefore exposed to varied stimuli functioning as input conditions to their intuitions of coalitional psychology.

Right-wing populist worldviews depict the world in simple terms, and simple terms make intuitive sense and are easy to process. But simple narratives are usually not factually accurate. This is why folk tales, religious and supernatural worldviews, and even paranormal or conspiracist ideas fare better to our evolved intuitions about the world than more complex, science-based explanations. However, what all these folk theories of the world have in common is that they commit violations of ontological categories, a phenomenon sometimes called ‘ontological confusion’ (i.e., the misattributing of features from one intuitive domain to another). For example, attributing properties such as crying, which belongs to our intuitive understanding of others’ mental states, to an artefact such as a statue can spur rich albeit epistemically unwarranted inferences.¹⁰⁷ Epistemically unwarranted beliefs are beliefs driven by insufficient proof, and they are usually intuitive (i.e., beliefs that are intuitively plausible but epistemically wrong).^{108 109} This is because intuitions deploy automatically but they do not also correct their output in accordance with our scientific understanding of the world. Only scientific analysis itself can confront and contain such intuitions.

Many folk ideas about the world are driven by imprecise activation of our intuitions, just as the activation of the proportionality bias promotes belief in conspiracy theories. Because our intuitions only serve as best guesses that may be false¹¹⁰, deriving common sense explanations from our intuitions can lead to epistemically unwarranted folk theories. This is because physical reality sometimes does not match our

¹⁰⁶ Rob Brotherton, *Suspicious minds*.

¹⁰⁷ Justin Barrett and Jonathan Lanman, “The science of religious belief”, *Religion*, 38 (2008): 109-124.

¹⁰⁸ Marjaana Lindeman and Aarnio Kia, “Paranormal beliefs”, 585-602.

¹⁰⁹ Emilio Lobato et al., “Examining the relationship between conspiracy theories, paranormal beliefs, and pseudoscience acceptance among a university population”, *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 28 (2014): 617-625.

¹¹⁰ Justin Barrett and Jonathan Lanman, “The science”, 109-124.

intuitive assumptions¹¹¹ because most of our intuitions evolved in the very different environment of our hunter-gatherer ancestors.

Let us consider folk biology (i.e., the intuitive understanding of biological kinds) as an example. Cross-culturally, people spontaneously build intuitive taxonomies and use heuristics to navigate them.¹¹² To this end, when trusting their instinct, people untrained in biology tend to believe that opossums are more similar to raccoons than they are to cows. However, opossums are marsupials and are therefore more closely related to cows than to raccoons.¹¹³ This means that, in the absence of scientific knowledge, we defer to our pre-theoretical stance and build folk theories about the world. Right-wing populists exploit our intuitive understanding of the world by using fake news and epistemically unwarranted beliefs to convey coalitional messages to their electorate in a cognitively plausible way.

Similarly, humans have the intuition of essentialism. The intuition of essentialism has likely evolved out of folk biology. It was probably adaptive to infer as much information as possible from a single encounter with a member from a different species. In this sense, an individual snake or an individual leopard, all else being equal, should be treated the same, from the perspective of survival, as would be any other snake or leopard. As a result, we likely evolved an adaptive learning strategy to consider that any individual from another species exhibits essentially the same traits and behaviours as any other individual of the same species. For survival purposes, this may be good enough.¹¹⁴

However, our intuition of essentialism can be mistaken when we wrongfully apply it to another domain of intuitive knowledge, such as folk psychology (e.g., the intuitive understanding of others' mental states). To this end, in developmental studies on psychological essentialism, children commonly express the belief that a hypothetical baby kangaroo that is raised by goat parents will grow up to look and act like a

¹¹¹ Robert McCauley and Emma Cohen, "Cognitive science and the naturalness of religion," *Philosophy Compass*, 5/9 (2010): 779-792.

¹¹² Scott Atran, "Basic conceptual domains", *Mind & Language*, Vol. 4, No. 1 and 2 (1989): 7-16.

¹¹³ Justin Barrett and Jonathan Lanman, "The science", 109-124.

¹¹⁴ Scott Atran, "Basic", 7-16.

kangaroo. But children also believe that a French baby brought up by English-speaking parents will grow up to speak French.¹¹⁵ In this case, our intuition returns an epistemically inaccurate output.

In another example, folk theories and explanations involving the supernatural are biased by agent-based explanations. Agent-based explanations are intuitive because they trigger our intuitions of coalitional threat and our intuitions about others' mental states. From an evolutionary perspective, it is adaptive to always be on the lookout for threatening individuals and hostile coalitions given that humans have always been the number one predator of humans. Moreover, there was a high cost associated with the failure to identify possible predators such that selection pressures likely promoted cognitive mechanisms designed to ring the alarm bell of predation even in unclear scenarios and noisy environments.

Historically, scientific enterprises have gradually discarded agent-based explanations for natural phenomena while turning more to probabilistic and mechanistic accounts. However, agent-based accounts are still intuitive, and they persist in various folk theories of the world, such as in supernatural and religious beliefs.^{116 117 118} As a result, if a salient outcome has no evident cause, the standard assumption in cultures with supernatural beliefs is that a supernatural (hidden) agent was most likely responsible for the act. For instance, folk theories in ancient Greece would attribute earthquakes to the god Poseidon.¹¹⁹ An offshoot of the same mechanisms is the belief that several hidden agents may conspire against our interests, and may have caused the salient outcome which was observed, as is the case with conspiracy theories.¹²⁰ It is no surprise that much right-wing populist narrative has a bit of both, nativist and supernatural elements on the one hand, as well as conspiracy theories on the other.

Etiquette and expertise work well to keep simple stories and intuitive or folk ideas in check, mainly because the latter are oftentimes epistemically unwarranted and therefore empirically false. And empirically false policies do not yield expected outcomes. On the other hand, right-wing populist leaders only need to acquire

¹¹⁵ Susan Gelman, *The essential child: Origins of essentialism in everyday thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

¹¹⁶ Stewart Guthrie, "Faces in the clouds: A new theory of religion" *New York: Oxford University Press* (1993).

¹¹⁷ Robert McCauley and Emma Cohen, "Cognitive", 779-792.

¹¹⁸ Helen De Cruz and Johan De Smedt, "The role", 351-368.

¹¹⁹ Scott Atran, "Pre-theoretical aspects of Aristotelian definition and classification of animals: The case for common sense", *Stud. Hist. Phil. Sci.*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (1985): 113-163.

¹²⁰ Rob Brotherton, *Suspicious minds*.

enough votes to win and may therefore show no visible concern for improving policy and wellbeing. And importantly, in cases when they do try to implement policy, their folk understanding of the world together with their wish to pander to the folk understanding of their voters leads to detrimental outcomes such as restricting rights for minorities and migrants, as well as leading to unfeasible mammoth infrastructure projects such as attempting to build giant walls alongside borders spanning for thousands of kms. Such resolves are intuitively plausible (e.g., the bigger the better) but are also empirically unworkable.

Shamelessness signals rebellion against the status quo, and intuitive worldviews strike a chord in the audience of right-wing populists cross-culturally because most intuitions are universal. Triggered in the right way, they can and often do promote support for right-wing populist leaders. Once political etiquette is dispensed with, basic primate dominance motivations are able to come to the fore. And once there are no reputational concerns about shamelessness, since this is interpreted by their audience as honesty and fight, populist leaders feel free to engage in coalition building and the pursuit of power.

If it can be claimed that right-wing populists are in a privileged position to mirror psychological motivations associated with human and non-human primate domination dynamics, as claimed in the present thesis, it follows that they would also include relatives and in-laws in the ruling coalition. Indeed, this pattern can be observed in illiberal democracies but also in autocracies. For instance, US president Donald Trump¹²¹, Turkey leader Erdogan¹²², and Brazil president Jair Bolsonaro¹²³ all appear to share this trait. The populist disregard for political etiquette is reflected here by the leader's lack of concern for appearing nepotist.

This is facilitated by the fact that corruption and nepotism are natural, and there is in principle no shame attached to being corrupt or nepotist. Shame however is a social emotion associated with reputation

¹²¹ Christine Adams, "Nepotism is bad for government. Trump's convention reminds us why.", *The Washington Post*, August 27, 2020. Available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/08/27/nepotism-is-bad-government-trumps-convention-reminds-us-why/> (Accessed 01/10/2020).

¹²² BBC, "Turkey's Erdogan son-in-law made finance minister amid nepotism fears", 10 July 2018. Available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-44774316> (Accessed 01/10/2020).

¹²³ Dom Phillips, "Diplomats 'perplexed' Bolsonaro wants to appoint his son ambassador to US", *The Guardian*, July 12 2019. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jul/12/bolsonaro-son-eduardo-us-ambassador-diplomats-response> (Accessed 01/10/2020).

management.¹²⁴ When political etiquette requires restricting corruption, there is a cost on reputation for acting corruptly. From the perspective of political etiquette, acting corruptly is shameful. In order to surpass this obstacle, right-wing populist leaders attempt to normalize corruption and nepotism so as not to incur reputational costs. They change the overtone window not horizontally but vertically by ‘lowering’ political etiquette to the realm of shamelessness. Right-wing populists manage this by appealing to voters’ intuitive worldviews. This affords voters the intuition that political etiquette itself is part of the problem. Having won voters’ consent, right-wing populist leaders are free to enhance the power of their coalition without showing concern for political etiquette. Similarly, right-wing populists seem to normalize far right ideas which can be intuitive provided that they managed to first activate our intuitions of essentialism and intergroup competition, among others.

Shamelessness and intuition afford right-wing populists leeway in antagonizing and circumventing checks and balances, undermining independent media and reforming the judiciary, while presenting such actions as much needed in order to counteract threatening outgroups as well as to fight alleged conspiracies between salient outgroups (e.g., migrants, Jews) on the one hand, and the targeted ‘corrupt elite’ (e.g., The Democratic Party, the EU) on the other.

Finally, the present contribution generates the following testable prediction: driven by phylogenetically ancient motivations and psychological biases and intuitions, the pursuit of power and prestige in right-wing populist leaders provokes societal transformations that turn democracies from liberal into illiberal, on a linear path towards authoritarian modes of government. This comes well in accordance with observed patterns from the cultural and biological evolution of primate and hominin political organization, complemented by populism scholarship and observations of right-wing populist behaviours, presented here as preliminary evidence for the stated hypothesis.

To the extent that increasing power for the coalition of right-wing populists is associated with dismantling checks and balances, which evidence suggests it is; to the extent that increased power leads to

¹²⁴ Dan Sperber and Nicolas Baumard, “Moral reputation: An evolutionary and cognitive perspective”, *Mind & Language*, 27 (2012): 495-518.

higher dominance and power asymmetries, which evidence again suggests it does; and to the extent that right-wing populist leaders manage to gain support from their audience by activating voter's intuitions, that afford the dismissal of established etiquette as well as the discrimination of outgroups, right-wing populism can be understood as proto-fascism.

6. Conclusion

Intuitive and automatic processing drives animal behaviour across a broad array of species, and humans make no exception. Just like desert ants who have automatic inferences guiding their foraging patterns and safe return to the colony, by estimating the general direction and rough distance covered, cognitive operations that occur most likely outside anything resembling conscious awareness¹²⁵, humans too have intuitions that help them negotiate the peculiarities of their specific environment.¹²⁶

Moreover, cues of a dangerous environment or those signalling threats in proximity lead humans to fall back on their intuitive processing, as it is fast and adaptive. But given the mismatch between the current environment of globalized, post-industrial societies, and the ancestral environment of hunter-gatherers wherein they evolved, our intuitions may not return the best possible outputs. They may in fact lead us to believe that migrants are out to get us and that restricting welfare and wellbeing for ethnic and gender minorities is the right thing to do.

Right-wing populist leaders have managed to tap into our coalitional intuitions in presenting cues of an unfavourable environment and by depicting various groups as dangerously threatening. They use simple stories such as Manichean conspiracist theories, nativist narratives, epistemically unwarranted accounts that are false but intuitively plausible, in order to advance their illiberal agenda. Simple stories are cognitively attractive because they are intuitive. The more they manage to bank on our intuitions, the more support they will receive from the public. The more support they receive, the more justifiable their actions become. By enhancing power and prestige as well as increasing the political influence of their coalition, right-wing

¹²⁵ Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber, *The enigma*.

¹²⁶ Robert Kurzban, *Why everyone*.

populist leaders enact basic primate dominance motives, and earn leeway to mend the rules of open democracy, eventually turning democracies into autocracies.

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