

The background of the book cover is a photograph of pine branches and leaves. The branches are thin and brown, with some green needles and larger, broad leaves. The overall color palette is muted, with a dark teal or greyish-blue background. The text is overlaid on this image.

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What Is Different?

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Wolfgang Tillmans

Series Editor

Brigitte Oetker

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The Power of Political Emotions On Political Camp Formation and the New Right-Wing Populism Philipp Hübl

Philipp Hübl (b. 1975) is Junior Professor of Theoretical Philosophy at the University of Stuttgart. His research examines the foundations of psychology and the neurosciences. He has published the books *Der Untergrund des Denkens: Eine Philosophie des Unbewussten* (The Underground of Thinking: A Philosophy of the Unconscious) and *Folge dem weißen Kaninchen ... in die Welt der Philosophie* (Follow the White Rabbit ... into the World of Philosophy), and essays on social and political issues for *Die Zeit*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *taz*, *die tageszeitung*, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, *Deutschlandradio*, and other outlets.

The Recent Polarization and the Emotional Underpinnings of Politics

The world is polarized.¹ The political landscape is increasingly fractured. Young and progressive urbanites embrace digital globalization and want freedom and openness, whereas the more conservative and, on average, older rural populace yearns for authority and tradition. The discrepancy was evident in the Brexit vote, Trump's victory in the US presidential elections, and the French, German, and Austrian elections in 2017. Even the constitutional referendum in Turkey, also in 2017, and the Arab Spring, which began in 2010, fit the same pattern.

This raises three obvious questions: Why don't all people share the same moral and political views? Why have these divisions become so entrenched? What is to be done? Most political analyses focus on social and economic factors in an effort to explain the rightward political shift in Europe or the worldwide rise of authoritarian thinking. Too few commentators have taken insights from psychology and neuroscience into account. In fact, empirical research has delineated a template that can be very helpful as we try to better understand the recent polarization in Western as well as non-Western nations, as a group led by the American moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt has demonstrated in hundreds of experiments with over 100,000 participants.² Many of their findings are valid across all cultures. Haidt and his colleagues have drawn on them for a cogent examination of the American two-party system.³ The basic ideas behind their study also provide a useful lens on European countries and Germany in particular.

In contradistinction to ethics, moral psychology does not pursue a normative project. Rather than trying to tell us what we *ought* to do, it seeks to identify the sources of our moral judgments.⁴ Ideally, one is tempted to answer promptly with a view to Kant's categorical imperative: such judgments should flow from reason.⁵ Yet Kant himself surmised that humans decide on a course of action on the basis of mere "inclinations," which is to say, of emotions.⁶ Haidt and his fellow researchers of the Moral Foundations group investigated this suspicion in an empirical study in which they asked participants to state reasons for their moral convictions. For instance, is incest between infertile adult siblings morally reprehensible? May one clean a toilet with the flag of one's country? Even when such thought experiments were qualified with the explicit provision that others would never know and there would be no adverse consequences for anyone, many interviewees intuitively believed: absolutely yes, and absolutely no! But the classic ethical argument that some kind of harm is being done does not apply to these cases: no pain or physical impairment is caused, nor is there any loss of freedom or property. When the subjects were asked to explain why such actions were reprehensible, they often lapsed into a state Haidt labels "moral dumbfounding."⁷ This would suggest that emotional dispositions and unreflective convictions underpin at least many of our normative intuitions. An intuition based on emotion effectively says "that is wrong" or "that is repulsive," even as we are incapable of naming a pertinent moral principle. The debate over how much influence such intuition exercises is ongoing. Regardless of what their outcome will be, these studies are certainly instructive for political thinking.

Progressive and Conservative Morality

This scholarship has isolated at least six emotion-based principles.⁸ *Care* finds beneficial expression in our compassion and compels us to assist children and people in need of help. *Freedom* motivates the wish to live a self-determined life unencumbered by coercion. *Fairness* is reflected in our sense of justice and raises our awareness of what game theory describes as cooperative equilibrium.

Different manifestations of these three principles can be shown to exist in all cultures and religions. When they are violated, we respond with negative emotions, and more specifically with moral outrage: we are indignant when suffering is inflicted on the weak, especially on children (care); when people are stripped of the right to express their personalities or oppressed and deprived of their autonomy (freedom); and when they are treated inequitably (fairness).

A surprising correlation exists between these three principles and political attitudes. The further to the left people place themselves in the political spectrum, the more emphasis they put on universal care for the weak, which they typically describe as *solidarity*. The more strongly people self-identify as liberal, the greater the value they place on freedom, or, in a negative interpretation, freedom from the coercions of the state. Leftists and liberals make up the cohort of progressives; they can be distinguished fairly well from the cohort of conservatives, who espouse more traditional values. One caveat: this schematic comparison of the progressive and conservative camps envisages an empirically founded realignment of the categories of political thinking. In Germany, in particular, the styles of thinking outlined above are not immediately reflected in the spectrum of political parties. For example, a *conservative* party can advocate progressive ideals, while a *leftist* party may stand for conservative ideals. In contrast with the United States, the German multiparty system is more multidimensional, above all because the various parties offer sometimes ambivalent programs to voters that cut across the dichotomy of progressive and conservative.

Be that as it may, the Moral Foundations group's studies of political systems around the world have shown that conservatives, too, value the progressive principles of care, freedom, and fairness. However, there are three additional principles on which they place equal importance that mean little to progressives. The first is *loyalty*. This is the principle that lets us divide the world into friend and foe. It regulates a group membership that extends beyond biological kinship and demands allegiance to the individual's tribe: his or her nation, religion, or soccer team. Loyalty manifests itself primarily in the penchant for athletics and physical conflict, which is more widespread in men than in women. The associated emotions are the pride taken in one's club or nation and a certain distrust of non-members. Although all humans are "social animals," as Aristotle emphasized, progressives show a somewhat diminished propensity to exclusive tribalism.⁹

The second principle is *authority*. It finds expression in hierarchy and the desire for recognition; in rank and honor, respect and subordination.¹⁰ Authority manifests itself in familial hierarchies such as patriarchy, in military honors and other accolades, in honorifics and the display of academic titles. People who value authority typically take a positive view of the military and police and believe in "resolute" and "rigorous" measures against crime.¹¹

Finally, the principle of *purity* suggests that a distinction exists between what is natural, pure, and healthy (e.g. marriage) and what is unnatural, impure, and unhealthy (e.g. incest). For example, many cultures take homosexuality to be natural and pure, and homosexuality to be unnatural and impure. In this perspective, clearly defined gender roles are regarded as natural, whereas fluid gender boundaries or androgyny are seen as unnatural.

Comparative studies have shown that these three principles rank high in non-Western cultures; within Western culture, they are espoused especially by self-identified "conservatives" and proponents of "traditional" lifestyles.¹² When the principles of loyalty and purity are violated, more conservative individuals respond not with moral outrage but with moral disgust. The same

5 Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* [1785], trans. and ed. Mary J. Gregor and Jens Timmermann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason* [1788], trans. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

6 Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 21–22.

7 Haidt, *Righteous Mind*, 29.

8 For an overview see Jesse Graham et al., "Moral Foundations Theory: The Pragmatic Validity of Moral Pluralism," in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, vol. 47, ed. Patricia Devine and Ashby Plant (San Diego: Academic Press, 2013), 55–130.

9 Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253a, 1–11.

10 Alan Page Fiske, *Structures of Social Life: The Four Elementary Forms of Human Relations* (New York: The Free Press, 1991).

11 Jesse Graham and Jonathan Haidt, "Sacred Values and Evil Adversaries: A Moral Foundations Approach," in *The Social Psychology of Morality: Exploring the Causes of Good and Evil*, ed. Phillip R. Shaver and Mario Mikulincer (New York: APA Books, 2011).

12 Haidt, *Righteous Mind*, 29.

13 Paul Rozin et al., "The CAD Triad Hypothesis: A Mapping between Three Moral Emotions (Contempt, Anger, Disgust) and Three Moral Codes (Community, Autonomy, Divinity)," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 76 (1999): 574–86; Prinz, *Emotional Construction*.

14 Haidt, *Righteous Mind*, 172; Paul Rozin and April E. Fallon, "A Perspective on Disgust," *Psychological Review*, no. 94 (1987): 3–11.

15 Mark Schaller and Justin H. Park, "The Behavioral Immune System (and Why It Matters)," *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, no. 20 (2011): 99–103.

1 An abridged version of this essay was published as Philipp Hübl, "Mitgefühl oder Ekel?," *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (May 29, 2017); on the current political shift to the right, see Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk, "The Danger of Deconsolidation," *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 3 (July 2016): 5–17.

2 They have chosen the name Moral Foundations Theory for their undertaking (www.moralfoundations.org).

3 See Jesse Graham et al., "The Moral Stereotypes of Liberals and Conservatives: Exaggeration of Differences across the Political Divide," *PLoS ONE* 7, no. 12 (2012): 1–13; and see also Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Penguin Books, 2012).

4 However, some scholars reject this distinction; see, Jesse J. Prinz, *The Emotional Construction of Morals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

16 Paul Rozin et al., “Operation of the Laws of Sympathetic Magic in Disgust and Other Domains,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 50 (1986): 703–12.

17 Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber, *The Enigma of Reason: A New Theory of Human Understanding* (London: Allen Lane, 2017), 289.

18 Corey L. Fincher et al., “Pathogen Prevalence Predicts Human Cross-Cultural Variability in Individualism/Collectivism,” *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 275, no. 1640 (2008): 1279–85; Corey L. Fincher and Randy Thornhill, “Assortative Sociality, Limited Dispersal, Infectious Disease and the Genesis of the Global Pattern of Religion Diversity,” *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 275, no. 1640 (2008): 2587–94.

19 *Erstes Gesetz zur Reform des Strafrechts (1. StrRG)* (June 25, 1969); for a discussion of this reform in German criminal law, see Tim Busch, *Die deutsche Strafrechtsreform: Ein Rückblick auf die sechs Reformen des deutschen Strafrechts (1969–1998)* (Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlag, 2005).

20 Yoel Inbar et al., “Conservatives Are More Easily Disgusted Than Liberals,” *Cognition and Emotion* 23, no. 4 (2009): 714–25; Kendall J. Eskine et al., “A Bad Taste in the Mouth: Gustatory Disgust Influences Moral Judgement,” *Psychological Science* 22 (2011): 295–99.

21 Graham et al., “Moral Foundations Theory,” 55–130; Robert R. McCrae, “Social Consequences of Experiential Openness,” *Psychological Bulletin*, no. 120 (1996): 323–37.

22 Randy Thornhill, “Parasites, Democratization, and the Liberalization of Values across Contemporary Countries,” *Biological Reviews* 84 (2009): 113–31; Jason Faulkner et al., “Evolved Disease-Avoidance Mechanisms and Contemporary Xenophobic Attitudes,” *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations* 7, no. 4 (2004): 333–53;

bifurcation, for that matter, is apparent when individuals themselves contravene the principles they endorse. People who believe that they have violated the principles of care, freedom, or fairness experience guilt; the conservative principles, by contrast, inspire a different emotion: those who transgress their own principles of purity or loyalty tend to feel not guilt but shame.¹³ Shame can be understood as a kind of self-disgust. Yet which evolutionary function does disgust serve, and why does it play such a crucial role for morality?

Apprehension of Novelty and the Appeal of Openness

Some people love cow milk infested with bacteria and mold fungus (cheese) or rotten fish (*surströmming*); others find them disgusting. The variability of humans’ disgust sensitivity may be understood by considering the *omnivore’s dilemma*.¹⁴ When our ancestors suffered food scarcity, they had to try new foods (be *neophilic*) or else they would have starved to death. On the other hand, they also needed to be wary of novelty (be *neophobic*), since many of these unfamiliar foods were toxic or infectious.

Disgust is the mechanism that protects us from harmful substances: we may be disgusted by cadavers, bodily fluids such as nasal mucus and blood, spoiled food, and foul-smelling people, all of which may be vectors for dangerous germs, worms, or parasites.¹⁵ Disgust as a protective system comes with several default settings, but it is also culturally malleable. For example, a classic experiment shows that people prefer not to drink from a bottle labeled “poison” even when they know that it contains harmless drinking water.¹⁶ The warning mechanism is calibrated to be so sensitive that it often raises false alarms. From an evolutionary perspective, this makes sense: it is better to be overly cautious than to take too many risks.¹⁷ The incautious died before they were able to pass on their genes. There is a wealth of empirical evidence of the protective function of disgust: cultures around the world have developed rules of hygiene and dietary laws to avoid infection. Such cleanliness requirements are especially strict in regions rife with pathogens.¹⁸

Not surprisingly, many religions conceive of sanctity as purity; consider the immaculate conception of the Virgin Mary, ablution rituals, or scrolls that must not be touched. Libertarian sexuality, in particular, was a major potential source of infection for much of human history, and so almost all the world’s religions regulate sexuality by, among other things, casting a taboo over specific practices. One example is adultery, which appears in the Old Testament as one of the worst sins in the Decalogue, on a par with murder and theft. More progressive societies such as Germany abolished the criminal prosecution of adultery decades ago. In this instance, the principle of freedom (as sexual self-determination) has overruled the principle of purity (moral purity in the form of monogamy).¹⁹

But the nexus between religion and purity extends beyond sexuality. Disgust not only protects us against harmful substances, it can also guard against persons, ideas, or actions. For instance, conservatives, especially in traditional societies, interpret group symbols such as the Christian cross, the Quran, or their country’s flags as objects of sacred purity and respond with contempt and hatred, a blend of anger and disgust, when someone abuses them by, say, burning the flag or physically or verbally defiling the Quran.

Although the moral bell curve in Western culture has shifted toward the progressive side, salient differences within society persist. Experiments have shown that people can be temporarily transformed into conservatives: subjects who were exposed to foul smells or made to drink disgusting beverages during an interview gave significantly more conservative replies to political questions than

the reference group.²⁰ In a nutshell: disgust makes people conservative. It is an inclination that correlates strongly with views on sex, life, and death. That is true both of momentary affects and of the enduring propensity to disgust: the stronger the latter is in an individual, the more conservative they are.²¹ And the more conservative someone is, the more highly they value the principle of purity and, accordingly, the more likely they are to view abortion, prostitution, assisted suicide, or homosexuality as unnatural and contemptible.

The principle of loyalty is likewise shored up by the propensity to be disgusted, as tribalism and apprehensive attitudes vis-à-vis strangers illustrate. In the past, alien groups often imported illnesses and parasites to which humans possessed no immunity.²² Comparative studies show that even today societies are most open to immigration when the danger of infectious diseases is lowest.²³ The problem, then, is that the propensity to be disgusted continues to determine the actions of some people in modern states under the rule of law although it has lost the protective function it served before the advent of civilization. Disgust also turns people into traditionalists. Individuals with a high propensity to be disgusted are generally distrustful of everything new. They rarely show positive subjective or physiological responses to surprising stimuli, preferring their lives to be defined by order and familiarity.²⁴

Progressives, by comparison, evince a significantly lower propensity to disgust. They are more neophilic and so need less structure and order in their lives; they cherish individuality, creativity, openness, and new impressions.²⁵ For example, they take an enthusiastic interest in contemporary art, which often does little for people who describe themselves as very conservative: art is frequently surprising and challenges ideas of authority, loyalty, and purity.

With a bit of overstatement, progressives may be described as “sensation seekers”:²⁶ they are open to non-traditional relationship models and sexual practices; they tend to be young and non-religious and do not care for flags, honors, or authorities.²⁷ On the contrary, the demonstrative rejection of authorities is often part and parcel of the self-image of progressives. They feel comfortable in a globalized world. They watch TV shows in the original English, embrace international friendships as enriching, are keen to try new cuisines and explore foreign countries. They may be poor—digital bohemians often are—but make up for it by being polyglot and cosmopolitan. They see diversity as a value in itself and can live with complexity. Freedom, variety, and openness are defining characteristics of life in major cities and the ideal of the generation of digital natives. This explains the electoral strength of progressive parties in cities and among young people, and of conservative parties in rural areas and among older voters.

In Germany, the movement of 1968 was an early progressive revolt, which turned against the political and social elite, who were influenced by authoritarian thinking. A young generation fought for emancipation, trying to break free of strictures like obligatory dress codes and shatter barriers to social advancement. These rebels wanted less authority and less purity; they demanded an end to the prosecution of “victimless crimes” such as drug use, extramarital sex, and homosexuality, and more fairness in the form of equal rights.²⁸

Extreme Right-Wing Thinking

Numerous analyses of populism and the current social schism mention feelings such as fear, hatred, or empathy, but they rarely actually benefit from the insights to be found in scientific studies of emotions. One widely proffered hypothesis is that individuals who fear a loss of social status can be drawn to extremism.²⁹ In fact, studies show that people with traditional values are more likely to harbor fears than progressives.³⁰ Fear is the evolutionary mechanism

Carlos David Navarrete and Daniel M. T. Fessler, “Disease Avoidance and Ethnocentrism: The Effects of Disease Vulnerability and Disgust Sensitivity on Intergroup Attitudes,” *Evolution and Human Behavior* 27 (2006): 270–82.

23 Faulkner et al., “Evolved Disease-Avoidance Mechanisms.”

24 David M. Amodio et al., “Neurocognitive Correlates of Liberalism and Conservatism,” *Nature Neuroscience* 10 (2007): 1246–47; Douglas R. Oxley et al., “Political Attitudes Vary with Physiological Traits,” *Science* 321, no. 5896 (2008): 1667–70; Natalie J. Shook and Russell H. Fazio, “Political Ideology, Exploration of Novel Stimuli, and Attitude Formation,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 45, no. 4 (2009): 995–98.

25 John T. Jost et al., “Political Conservatism as Motivated Social Cognition,” *Psychological Bulletin* 129, no. 3 (2003): 339–75.

26 Jonathan W. Roberti, “A Review of Behavioral and Biological Correlates of Sensation Seeking,” *Journal of Research in Personality* 38, no. 3 (2004): 256.

27 Graham et al., “Moral Foundations Theory.”

28 For a discussion of “victimless crimes,” see Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: The Decline of Violence in History and Its Causes* (New York: Allen Lane, 2011).

29 For instance, Franz Walter and his colleagues concur with Seymour Lipset’s analysis: Franz Walter et al., *Rechts-extremismus und Fremden-feindlichkeit in Ostdeutschland: Ursachen, Hintergründe, regionale Kontextfaktoren* (Göttingen: Göttinger Institut für Demokratieforschung, 2017); Seymour M. Lipset, “Democracy and Working-Class Authoritarianism,” *American Sociological Review* 24, no. 4 (1959): 482–501.

30 John T. Jost et al., “The End of the End of Ideology,” *American Psychologist* 61, no. 7 (October 2006): 651–70;

Michael D. Dodd et al., "The Political Left Rolls with the Good and the Political Right Confronts the Bad: Connecting Physiology and Cognition to Preferences," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B* 367, no. 1589 (2012): 640–49.

31 John Allman, *Evolving Brains* (New York: Scientific American Library, 1999).

32 Paul Ekman, "Basic Emotions," in *The Handbook of Cognition and Emotion*, ed. Tim Dalgleish and Michael Power (New York: Wiley, 1999), 45–60; Jesse Prinz, *Gut Reactions: A Perceptual Theory of Emotions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

33 Florian Van Leeuwen and Justin H. Park, "Perceptions of Social Dangers, Moral Foundations, and Political Orientation," *Personality and Individual Differences*, no. 47 (2009): 169–73.

34 Mercier and Sperber, *The Enigma of Reason*.

35 For an overview, see www.ki.uni-konstanz.de/kik.

36 Richard S. Lazarus, *Emotion and Adaptation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); for a discussion, see also Andreas Zick et al., *Gespaltene Mitte – Feindselige Zustände: Rechtsextreme Einstellungen in Deutschland 2016* (Bonn: Dietz, 2016), 97.

37 Heribert Prantl, *Gebrauchsanweisung für Populisten* (Salzburg: Ecowin, 2017).

38 Borwin Bandelow in an interview in *Wirtschaftswoche* (January 20, 2016).

39 Rozin and Fallon, "A Perspective on Disgust"; Joshua Tybur et al., "Disgust: Evolved Function and Structure," *Psychological Review* 120, no. 1 (January 2013): 65–84; Paul Rozin et al., "Disgust," in Lisa Feldman Barrett et al., *Handbook of Emotions* (New York: Guilford, 2008), 757–76.

40 For an overview of these findings, see Theodor W. Adorno, *The Authoritarian*

that warns us of dangers: we may be afraid of snakes, dark rooms, and strangers. The neuronal circuit for fear probably emerged very early in our evolution, as is suggested by the fact that it is found in all mammals and even in birds.³¹ Fear induces us to avoid sources of danger and prepares us to take flight.³² Not surprisingly, conservatives see the world as a more dangerous place than progressives.³³ In and of itself, that is not a problem. On the contrary, with fear as with disgust, too much is better than too little. In our phylogenetic history, those who felt no fear were unable to pass on their genes because they took too many fatal risks.³⁴

One can debate how justifiable or rational various fears are that are widespread in our societies. For example, if you get your news from television, it is impossible to avoid the impression that the crime rate in Germany is rising, when it has in fact continually declined for fifty years.³⁵ The resulting sense of fear is certainly irrational in the specific sense that it paints the world as a more dangerous place than it is. Yet fear alone does not instill xenophobic or anti-democratic sentiments in people. The most it can do is make them receptive to issues such as the "order," "protection," and "security" to be gained, for example, by increased police presence, video surveillance, or the installation of high-security front doors.³⁶ That is why Heribert Prantl's assessment that "populist extremists appeal to base instincts rather than hearts and minds" is simplistic,³⁷ as is Borwin Bandelow's claim that xenophobia is rooted in "irrational fears."³⁸

These and similar analyses fail to recognize the role that excessive feelings of disgust play in extreme right-wing thinking. As suggested above, disgust, far from being a base instinct, is a complex emotion; compared to fear or aggression, it is a product of fairly recent evolutionary history, as is illustrated by the fact that animals evince low disgust sensitivity.³⁹

On many issues, right-wing extremists occupy the outer reaches of conservative morality, as Erich Fromm, Theodor Adorno, and Max Horkheimer conjectured in their studies on the authoritarian personality.⁴⁰ Recent systematic research has confirmed their hypothesis. However, this analysis needs to be qualified with three caveats. Firstly, it does not follow that conservatives are inclined toward right-wing extremism. On the contrary, many conservatives, precisely because they are aware of a certain proximity between their emotional dispositions and those on the far right, emphasize the need to draw a clear distinction. Secondly, research has shown that styles of thinking and emotional principles are gradual phenomena that can be more or less pronounced. Emotional disposition is a good predictor, though not determinative, of political preferences. Thirdly, the classic leftist ideologies also show the influence of authoritarian thinking. The former socialist countries were ruled by unity parties and central committees that restricted the individual's autonomy (freedom) to act at the expense of the collective (loyalty). Contrary to the communist ideal of equality (fairness), rigid hierarchies (authority) were ubiquitous. The extreme leftist style of thinking is presumably less sensitive to its own susceptibility to the allure of authoritarian power because it associates authority and oppression primarily with monarchy and capitalism, the form of government and social system it seeks to overcome.

Be that as it may, an excessive propensity to be disgusted is the key to an understanding of the extreme right, where loyalty and tribalism are transformed into allegiance to "blood and soil" and thus into racism and xenophobia. Those who are merely fearful of strangers choose the coping strategy of avoidance.⁴¹ Xenophobia is qualitatively different because it represents a mixture of aggression and disgust.⁴² Numerous studies have shown that the dehumanization of strangers or others viewed as "repulsive" or "inferior" is the first stage of what is called group-against-group *dominance violence*.⁴³ Moreover, among the

extreme right, the desire for authority and structure is distorted into a longing for an autocratic leader who will really "clean up this mess." In some right-wingers, this longing is so strong that they are willing to sacrifice democracy. The preference for purity escalates into revulsion: homosexuality is seen as "nauseating," as are blurred gender roles and, certainly, the "filthy green leftist" ideology of the majority.⁴⁴ The "enraged citizen," in a word, is actually a disgusted citizen.

As Volker Weiß has shown, the ideology and vocabulary of the new right originate in the writings of Armin Mohler and other exponents of the so-called "conservative revolution," whose preoccupations tend to revolve around power through authority, loyalty to the *Volks*, and purity.⁴⁵ Similarly, when Oswald Spengler, another early luminary of the new right, describes political parties as "swarms of parasites infesting the body of the Reich," one may fairly suspect an underlying propensity to disgust.⁴⁶

With their penchant for authority and tribal thinking, men are more susceptible to extreme right-wing ideas, whereas women, who emphasize care and fairness, tend to be progressive.⁴⁷ Little wonder, then, that extreme right-wing parties have the smallest proportion of women members and voters.

Disgust is also the bridge between the extreme right's Islamophobia and its anti-Americanism: both reject a putative menace to male identity. Right-wing extremists perceive young male strangers in their proximity or on their territory as a physical threat, but they also see the United States as a cultural superpower that endangers their own regional or national identity. Not surprisingly, the movement known as Pegida (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the West) was complemented, in 2015, by one that styled itself Pegada (Patriotic Europeans Against the Americanization of the West).⁴⁸

Similarly, the anti-Semitism in the Weimar Republic of the 1920s and 1930s can be linked to two typical dispositions of the extreme right: anti-Semites regarded Jews as a threat "because of the positions they occupied in trade and finance—and because of their allegedly decadent morality, as suggested by their avant-garde positions in art and literature; they seemed to be the successful competitors, sexually and professionally."⁴⁹ These perceptions may be interpreted as an affront to the male penchant for authority in conjunction with a putative violation of the principle of purity.

The enmity of today's extreme right toward female public figures such as politicians and journalists that is especially evident in sexualized online hate speech likewise grows out of a double humiliation: men perceive it as a loss of authority that women rise to positions of power and influence over them, and as a violation of the principle of purity when these women even reject their ostensibly "natural" role, self-identifying as feminists or refusing to be sexually available.⁵⁰

Hardened Fronts

But why have the front lines become so entrenched? That, too, is a question that studies can help us answer. Firstly, as mentioned above, all humans, evolutionarily speaking, are tribalists:⁵¹ we tend to want to be members of a "tribe," be it a people, a nation, the bourgeoisie, our favorite sports team's fan base, or a cohort of urban intellectuals. Such allegiances matter more to conservatives and right-wing extremists than to progressives. Still, the latter, too, consciously draw lines of exclusion around their own groups. Self-identification results in the famous *echo chamber effect*.⁵² As already familiar opinions become self-reinforcing, even moderates tend to shift toward the outer edges, a process that can flatten the central bulge of the bell curve of political positions.⁵³

Personality (New York: Harper & Row, 1950). However, the studies were methodologically questionable; see John Levi Martin, "The Authoritarian Personality, 50 Years Later: What Lessons Are There for Political Psychology?," *Political Psychology* 22, no. 1 (March 2001): 1–26.

41 Lazarus, *Emotion and Adaptation*.

42 Paul Ekman, *Emotions Revealed* (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2003).

43 Pinker, *Better Angels*; see also Harald Welzer, *Täter: Wie aus ganz normalen Menschen Massenmörder werden* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2005).

44 Volker Weiß, *Die Autoritäre Revolte: Die NEUE RECHTE und der Untergang des Abendlandes* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2017), 228–29.

45 Ibid.

46 Oswald Spengler, *Neubau des deutschen Reiches* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1924), 190.

47 Jesse Graham et al., "Mapping the Moral Domain," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 101 (2011): 366–85.

48 "Hunderte demonstrieren gegen die Amerikanisierung des Abendlandes," *Spiegel Online* (January 24, 2015), <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/pegada-demo-in-erfurt-gegen-die-amerikanisierung-des-abendlandes-a-1014839.html>.

49 Franz Neumann, "Angst und Politik," in *Demokratischer und autoritärer Staat: Beiträge zur Soziologie der Politik* (Frankfurt am Main: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1967), 184–214.

50 Becky Gardiner, Mahana Mansfield, et al. "The Dark Side of Guardian Comments," *Guardian* (April 12, 2016), <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/apr/12/the-dark-side-of-guardian-comments>.

51 Joshua Greene, *Moral Tribes: Emotion, Reason and the Gap between Us and Them* (New York: Penguin, 2013).

52 Also known as “group polarization”; see David G. Myers and Helmut Lamm, “The Polarizing Effect of Group Discussion,” *American Scientist* 63, no. 3 (May–June 1975): 297–303; David G. Myers, “Polarizing Effect of Social Interaction,” in *Group Decision Making*, ed. Hermann Brandstätter et al. (London: Academic Press, 1982).

53 Pinker, *Better Angels*.

54 “Für eine demokratische Polarisierung: Wie man dem Rechtspopulismus den Boden entzieht,” interview with Jürgen Habermas, *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik* (2016), no. 11: 35–42.

55 This is true in particular of AfD voters; see Katharina Brunner and Sabrina Ebitsch, “In der rechten Echokammer,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (May 1, 2017); see also Michela Del Vicario et al., “Echo Chambers: Emotional Contagion and Group Polarization on Facebook,” *Nature Scientific Reports* (2016), no. 6.

56 Graham et al., “Moral Stereotypes.”

57 Holly A. McGregor et al., “Terror Management and Aggression: Evidence that mortality salience motivates aggression against worldview-threatening others,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 74, no. 3 (1998): 590–605.

58 Kristen D. Deppe et al., “Reflective Liberals and Intuitive Conservatives: A Look at the Cognitive Reflection Test and Ideology,” *Judgment and Decision Making* 10, no. 4 (2015): 314–31.

59 Thomas Talhelm, “Liberals Think More Analytically (More ‘Weird’) than Conservatives,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 41, no. 2 (2012): 250–67.

However, this shift is not symmetrical, even though, as Jürgen Habermas has noted, the public discourse evinces a “compulsive tendency to construct symmetries.”⁵⁴ A *Süddeutsche Zeitung* report on social networks showed that progressive and conservative camps are relatively open to news from a variety of media, whereas the right-wing edge lives in an almost hermetically sealed echo chamber.⁵⁵

Secondly, to make matters worse, both camps fundamentally misjudge the other side. Progressives, in particular, regard all those who, according to the traditional scheme, are to their right as more extreme than they are.⁵⁶ In Germany, this was evident during the so-called refugee crisis, when leftist discourse suspected anyone who criticized the decision to welcome the inflow of refugees of xenophobia. Once people have joined a camp, they respond with disproportionate aggression to exposure to the other side’s views.⁵⁷

Thirdly, and this is the crucial asymmetry, progressives tend to favor an analytical style of thinking, whereas conservatives and especially right-wing extremists prefer a more intuitive, less abstract, and more holistic style guided by feelings rather than facts and arguments.⁵⁸ Surprisingly, an individual’s style of thinking is more closely correlated with their political orientation than the views on economic policy that are traditionally used to assign people to political camps.⁵⁹

The analytical style of thinking privileges reason over emotions. Its intuitive counterpart is less receptive to a scientific and, more specifically, statistical understanding of the world. Populist rulers subordinate the truth to their normative (moral, political) agenda, but so does part of the electorate. Their motto might be: “Ideology first, facts second.”

This attitude, which may be called the “post-factual style of thinking,” is characteristic of a social group rather than an entire era. That is because the dissemination of “fake news” and the vilification of the “lying press” are two sides of the same coin. Both are driven by the desire to have the world conform to one’s own normative views. When it does not, an individual can avoid *cognitive dissonance*—the discomfort of holding incompatible beliefs—either by revising their views or by reinterpreting the world.⁶⁰ Given the human propensity to self-deception, people often choose the latter: whatever does not fit is made to fit—given a different interpretation, discounted, or actively ignored.⁶¹ This tendency is aided by a cognitive malfunction known as *confirmation bias*.⁶² People are inclined to gather information that supports their views but not evidence that disproves them. This inclination becomes more widespread the more intuitively people think, a correlation that can be observed in the extreme left as well as right.

Progressives’ openness to novelty and their analytical style of thinking make them better prepared to live with contradictions. They are more likely to accept their own inconsistencies and a confusingly complex world, instead of casting about for simple reasons, personal causal agents, or secret puppet masters such as “the elites,” “the CIA,” or “the Zionists” to explain the world’s injustices and silence their own cognitive dissonance.

Progressives, in addition, more frequently reconsider their spontaneous emotional responses and so censor their initial impulses, while conservatives and right-wing extremists show greater consonance between their gut feelings and moral judgments.⁶³ The capacity for self-censorship or “self-coercion,” as Norbert Elias would call it, is an important factor promoting cultural and especially moral progress.⁶⁴

What Is to Be Done?

Democratic citizens in the progressive and conservative camps do not yet confront the hostility of authoritarians and populists, especially on the extreme right, with sufficient determination. In debates over normative questions—in public forums such as talk shows, but also in private conversation—they too often decline to engage in the game of offering and demanding reasons. For example, when right-wing extremists call marriage equality for gays and lesbians into question by expressing their discomfort, they must be compelled to do the hard work of defending their view with arguments: Which moral rights are actually being violated? Which study suggests that adoption by gay couples endangers the child’s welfare? Is their rejection of marriage equality motivated by an actual reason rather than a diffuse sentiment?

Of course, such attempts at engagement will only rarely be fruitful, since an intuitive style of thinking in particular can be impervious to the “peculiarly constraint-free force of the better argument.”⁶⁵ That is why it is sometimes advisable to emotionalize norms. The objection that any appeal to emotions is tantamount to a kind of populism is unwarranted, as long as the emotions one appeals to are not the wrong ones and one does not betray truth.

For example, assessing the need for climate protection requires the ability to think scientifically. An individual’s intuitive self-observation will assess his or her personal contribution to environmental pollution to be diminutive; the consequences materialize with considerable delay. People with an intuitive style of thinking are ill-prepared to handle this sort of abstraction and deferred causation.⁶⁶ Extreme right-wingers, moreover, are likely to close their ears when environmentalism is advocated on the basis of the progressive moral principle of care for subsequent generations.⁶⁷ One study has argued that a more fruitful strategy is to emotionalize the problem by referring to the purity or sanctity of nature, which, to some audiences, is a gift from God.⁶⁸

Another technique predominantly employed by progressives, shaming, which is to say, the social exposure of moral misconduct, may sometimes be successful in certain situations by triggering feelings of guilt or shame in violators and offenders. However, it is often perceived as patronizing, especially by conservatives and liberals. Furthermore, when such criticism is leveled at people who think intuitively, it may backfire:⁶⁹ when individuals with an intuitive style of thinking are shown that their beliefs are inconsistent, they tend to dig in their heels rather than revise their position. The desire that the world conform to their own norms is stronger than the interest in truth. Appealing to their emotional dispositions is the more promising strategy.

Still, it must be acknowledged that arguments coupled with appropriate emotional triggers are often insufficient. An individual wedded to a closed extreme right-wing worldview or deeply invested in a conspiracy theory will not even be bothered when others point out that their convictions are demonstrably self-contradictory.⁷⁰ In the short term, little can be done in such cases.

In the longer run, however, there is reason for hope. Contrary to Haidt and his colleagues’ hypothesis, we are not helplessly at the mercy of our emotional dispositions. If we were, there would be no moral progress and we would still think and act as our distant ancestors did. Many studies have shown that more progressive moral views correlate with educational attainment and self-control.⁷¹ How much the public and every one of us invests in education, be it our own or that of our fellow citizens, is a question not primarily of reason but of will.⁷² For enlightenment requires not just the courage to make use of one’s understanding, but also the courage to listen to others and be persuaded by their arguments.

60 Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1957).

61 Alfred Mele, “Real Self-Deception,” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 20, no. 1 (1997): 91–136; see also William Hirstein, *Brain Fiction: Self-Deception and the Riddle of Confabulation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).

62 Raymond S. Nickerson, “Confirmation Bias: A Ubiquitous Phenomenon in Many Guises,” *Review of General Psychology* 2, no. 2 (1998): 175–220.

63 Scott Eidelman et al., “Low-Effort Thought Promotes Political Conservatism,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* (2012), no. 38: 808–20; Linda J. Skitka et al., “Dispositions, Scripts, or Motivated Correction? Understanding Ideological Differences in Explanations for Social Problems,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 83, no. 2 (2002): 470–87.

64 Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Urizen Books, 1978); Pinker, *Better Angels*.

65 Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, vol. 1: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984), 28.

66 Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (London: Allen Lane, 2011).

67 Concern about the climate and environmental protection is lowest among AfD voters; see Knut Bergmann et al., “Die AfD: Eine Partei der sich ausgeliefert fühlenden Durchschnittsverdiener?,” *Zeitschrift für Parlamentsfragen (ZParl)*, no. 1 (2017): 63.

68 Sabine M. Marx et al., “Communication and Mental Processes: Experiential and Analytic Processing of Uncertain Climate Information,” *Global Environmental Change: Human and Policy Dimensions* (2007), no. 17: 47–58;

for a discussion, see Dan M. Kahan, "Ideology, Motivated Reasoning, and Cognitive Reflection," *Judgment and Decision Making* 8, no. 4 (2013): 407–24.

69 Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler, "When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misperceptions," *Political Behavior* 32, no. 2 (2010): 303–30.

70 Sara E. Gorman and Jack Gorman, *Denying to the Grave: Why We Ignore the Facts That Will Save Us* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

71 Pinker, *Better Angels*; Kahneman, *Thinking*; for data on Germany, see Andreas Zick et al., *Gespaltene Mitte*; Oliver Decker et al., eds., *Die enthemmte Mitte: Autoritäre und rechtsextreme Einstellung in Deutschland. Die Leipziger Mitte-Studie 2016* (Gießen: Psychosozial-Verlag, 2016).

72 See Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?" [1784], in *Practical Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 11–22.



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