

Emotional landscape of politics

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ABSTRACT: This paper offers an interdisciplinary perspective on the meaning of emotion in politics. Politics will be understood as a people’s ability to live together. The author is a ranging synthesis of social sciences, psychology, biology and neuroscience for better illustration of issues of populism and other forms of social engagement. The paper is in the form of bringing the topics of emotions as a compass of our common human behavioural political make-up. Using the landscape metaphor allows for exploring the complete divergence of human emotions, sunny peaks of empathy, altruism, trust and dark shadowed valleys of fear, anger and distrust. In this manner, some explanation for populist behaviour is given. Collecting various sources of data is offered to experiment with varied forms of narrative and finally to discuss the findings but also to articulate an “emotional” call to collective kindness.

KEYWORDS: emotions, behaviour, politics, collaboration, altruism, change, kindness

This paper will offer an interdisciplinary perspective on the meaning of emotion in politics. The author will weave together the very latest science with stories touching your heart. It will be a survey of a vast landscape of human evolution and experiences resulting in a convoluted world with many peaks and valleys. Politics will be understood as a people’s ability to live together. Now a controversial view of human nature is emerging in biological and cognitive sciences. Recent research and discoveries in neuroscience are giving us some hints for a better understanding of the underpinnings of political behaviour. Emotions are a crucial catalyst of our conduct. It is estimated that 95% of our reactions are unconsciously powered by amygdale while ‘the governing center’—cerebral cortex—exerts a slight impact. Although our brain

is commonly deemed to be rational, it is actually the emotional brain. Emotions go first. Also, we have to rethink the deeply rooted belief that humans are, by nature, aggressive and self-interested. We have forgotten the emphasis placed by Darwin on the importance of cooperation in nature. This paper will present an “emotional” interpretation of our common human behavioural political make-up. Using the landscape metaphor allows for exploring in full divergence of human emotions, sunny peaks of empathy, altruism, trust and dark shadowed valleys of fear, anger and distrust. The underlying assumption of this paper is the possibility of forging a wider path of politics of kindness. It will be drawn upon not only findings and insights from biology, neuroscience, economics, history, social and political sciences, but experiences of practitioners of contemplative arts and altruism too. There are many studies illustrating the ways our minds change in response to activity and life experiences. Here politics creeps in - humans are social beings, they can pass the critical threshold and go up for cooperation and trust or they can go down for fear, anxiety and disgust. Let’s engage our emotions in a political way.

But what about populism? What is the meaning of this word? What lies behind the veil of the word? After reading a bunch of definitions—I have got a little bogged there—but I think that there are EMOTIONS. Authors’ and Readers’ emotions (fear, anxiety, loathing). Participants’/Actors’ emotions are the same and more. Populism is a political program or movement that champions, or claims to champion, the common person, usually by favourable contrast with a real or perceived elite or establishment. The term populism is often shown as a movement pandering to a people’s fear, enthusiasm and quest for equity. But populism derives from the Latin—*populus* (people) and “we the people” act in the interest of others (the mass)—we call it altruism or an act of kindness. Thus, we start with a deep dive...

INTO SWIRLING POOL OF EMOTIONS

Emotions are things that happen to us. We start the day happily, but suddenly we see or hear something (small social injustice or something irritating) which makes us boil with anger, we feel upset. Other times our emotions creep up on us unconsciously and we feel “blue”, sad and unhappy. Our emotions seem to function of their own accord; we feel little control over them.

Emotions are a crucial catalyst of our conduct. It is estimated that 95% of our reactions are unconsciously powered by amygdale while “the governing center“, cerebral cortex, exerts slight impact. Although our brain is commonly deemed to be rational, it is actually the emotional brain. The human brain is capable of creating symbolic language and strategic thinking. The latter one embraces memories from the distant past and imaginations of possible distant futures. We are able to imagine our own future state with accompanying emotions, and choose a proper strategy. What is more, people are able to feel empathy, i.e. read other people’s psychological condition and emotions, which helps predict their behaviour and thus enhances the quality of strategic thinking. A “side effect” of empathy is the fact it encourages cooperation and altruistic conduct. Empathy appears to be evolutionarily related to *Homo sapiens*.

There is more and more evidence proving that it is a result of a very sophisticated genetic regulation which, however, occurred in the effect of accidental genetic mutation and eventually changed the brain's structure (new connections). It was dormant, but when climate conditions changed, it was activated in order to handle the situation, as claimed, among others, by Colin Blakemore, a British neurobiologist (2010).

Since cooperation is related to trust, what should be done to trigger cooperation in order to solve some collective problem, even if it does not necessarily pay for individuals? Is it connected with evolution, the brain and hormone production as well? Generally, it is an important question from the evolutionary perspective, as cooperation does not seem to match competition and natural selection.

Emotions tie us in a very physical way to the world; they play a crucial role in structuring human thoughts and prosocial behaviour, "certain aspects of the process of emotion and feeling are indispensable for rationality" (Damasio, 2000, p. xiii). Neuroscientists have found the region of the brain where emotions and reasoning interact - the anterior cingulate cortex (Damasio, 2000, p. 71). What we call the mind is a complex assembly of biochemical and neural regulatory networks that operate as a whole. Pessoa recently affirmed that "the neural basis of emotion and cognition should be viewed as governed less by properties that are intrinsic to specific sites and more by contextually determined interactions among multiple brain regions. In this sense, emotion and cognition are functionally integrated systems, namely, they more or less continuously impact each other's operations" (Pessoa, 2014). Feelings and reason are intertwined in a kind of tango dance. Emotions reflect not just what happens to us but how we interpret things. As Shakespeare succinctly put in Hamlet: "Why, then, 'tis none to you, for there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so" (Act 2; Scene 2, p. 11).

The experience of emotion—even on a subconscious level—has a powerful influence on the neural faculties responsible for making rational decisions. Antonio Damasio has suggested that such decision-making entails the rapid evaluation of a set of possible outcomes with respect to the future consequences associated with each course of action. Probably the generation of conscious or subconscious mental images that represent the consequences of each contingency triggers emotional states that involve either actual alterations of somatic and visceral motor function, or the activation of neural representations of such activity. Experimental studies of fear conditioning have suggested just such a linking role for the amygdala in associating sensory stimuli with aversive consequences. These clinical observations suggest that the amygdala and prefrontal cortex, as well as their striatal and thalamic connections, are not only involved in processing emotions, but also participate in the complex neural processing responsible for what we consider rational thinking. All humans will respond in the same way, with a startle reflex, when they are suddenly exposed to an unknown and unexpected loud noise. But when faced with a gun, people can react differently, according to their experiences and memories (Phelps, 2006).

What it means is that what we call reality is something that is different for all of us. Most of the time, the story our brains generate matches the real, physical world—but not always. Our brain also unconsciously bends our perception of reality to meet

our desires or expectations. And it fills in gaps using our past experiences. Which also means that the brain is not hardwired at all. **It changes.** Our history, skills, choices, and habits mold our brains. Our brains are flexible, or “plastic,” because neurons can do new things by forging new or stronger connections with other neurons. Brain plasticity is an intrinsic property of the nervous system enabling rapid adaptation in response to changes in an organism’s internal and external environment. In prenatal and early postnatal development, plasticity allows for the formation of organized nervous system circuitry and the establishment of functional networks. As the individual is exposed to various sensory stimuli in the environment, brain plasticity allows for functional and structural adaptation and underlies learning and memory.

Our emotions and mental processes are rooted in context—environment and, groups, and communities we live in. The research has recently started to explain the neural basis of social terms of higher rank, such as mechanisms connected with intergroup relations and moral judgments. Most theories focused on higher-order emotions such as a sense of guilt, shame or empathy. It has recently been acknowledged, however, that the most basic emotions, fear and anger, may also play a significant role. Neurological research indicates that oxytocin – a neuropeptide that plays a key role in behaviour connected with trust and is released exclusively by mammals- may be crucial. It is released by our body when we feel safety and connection to others [3]. Oxytocin is a positive side of social relations. Oxytocin is among the most important neurochemicals involved in our experience of two linked human traits that are essential for the survival of humans—trust and cooperation (Zolli & Healy, 2012, p. 145).

Physiological and environmental signals stimulate our social cooperation. Life experience may “retouch” mechanisms of oxytocin release. SA’s safe and caring environment stimulates oxytocin release. A level of trust rises because mechanisms of reciprocity occur. The reciprocity that turns out to be equitable over the long term is a crucial component of every human society and of a large number of animal societies [4]. In human societies, reciprocity is inbuilt into the texture of a balanced community within which everybody is ready to help everyone else and shows gratitude when helped in return. In small communities where people know each other, everyone takes it for granted and if the member of the group doesn’t play the game, he or she will be quickly ostracized by the rest of the community. But in big or even huge communities, it is impossible to know each other. That facilitates different stances: voluntary, quasi-anonymous reciprocity in cooperative organizations and generalized reciprocity in state institutions (Ricard, 2013, p. 88).

Teamwork is important in human societies. Selection for teamwork probably began very early in human evolution. Human infants spontaneously point things out to others, and not merely to get what they want, which chimpanzees do not do at any age. Symbolic thought, language and the social transmission of information are fundamentally communal activities that rely on trustworthy social partners. Exploitation, cheating and free riding do exist in human groups, but what is most remarkable is that we abhor them. Teamwork enabled our ancestors to spread throughout Africa and beyond. *Homo sapiens* diversified culturally to occupy hundreds of ecological niches, harvesting everything. Domesticating plants and animals meant living a bounded ex-

istence. Surplus food and permanent residence increased the population and created more and more complicated structures. We now live in groups of groups of groups.

It turns out that the size of the neocortex correlates closely to the group size of primates. The relative size of the neocortex rose as social groups became larger in order to maintain the complex set of relationships necessary for stable coexistence. Robin Dunbar speculated that social animals need to continuously keep track of each other's feelings and interactions and adjust to each other's needs and moods in order to maintain the social cohesion of the group. It was suggested that given the human-brain ratio we have an expected social group size of around 150 people, called "clans". Clans organize in more loosely affiliated groups—mega-bands, about 500 people, and mega-bands affiliate in larger groups—tribes, 1,500 to 2,000 people united by common language or dialect (Dunbar, 1996, p. 70). Our brains are not as large as they are in order to provide each of us with the raw computational power to think our way out of a sticky situation. Instead, our brain size helps each of us to deal with the large and complex network of relationships we rely on to thrive.

Human beings are social primates, and our ideas about when to cooperate or not have been strongly influenced by the groups on which we depend for survival. Primatologist Frans de Waal investigated cooperation and perceptions of inequality. He had done experiments with pairs of capuchin monkeys. One monkey receives a bland piece of cucumber, which she's happy to get until she sees that the other monkey's reward for the very same task is a tasty grape. The one who gets a lesser reward (cucumber) instead of a (sweet) grape hurls the cucumber back at the researcher, rattles her cage, and pounds the floor in angry protest. Such behaviour is further evidence that humans are not the only species to boast a moral code and that morality is separate from God and religion. Instead, it's related to what De Waal calls the "prosocial tendencies" of primates and other animals, a self-awareness—and awareness of others—that gives rise to emotional responses like reconciliation, empathy and consolation (see https://www.ted.com/talks/frans_de_waal_moral_behavior_in_animals/transcript). De Waal showed other examples, including the experiment with juvenile stump-tailed and rhesus monkeys housed together for five months—during which the stump-tails' mellowness rubbed off on their more belligerent cousins - reconciliation behavior in rhesus monkeys can be affected by the social environment, which means that humans, can also be affected by the social environment; there were chimps showing empathy by unselfishly caring for their partners' well-being, for example, and a pair of elephants figuring out how to haul in a tricky feeding apparatus by coordinating their efforts; evidence of "yawn contagion", (mirroring like other manifestations of empathy (human and not) means perceiving "otherness").

Other experiments show that the human sense of fairness is an evolutionary puzzle. Passive and active protest against receiving less than a partner for the same task is widespread in species that cooperate outside kinship and mating bonds. This reaction probably reflects an attempt to forestall partner dissatisfaction with obtained outcomes and its negative impact on future cooperation. Sarah Brosnan and Frans de Waal hypothesize that "it is the evolution of this response that allowed the development of a complete sense of fairness in humans, which aims not at equality for its

own sake but for the sake of continued cooperation (...) Humans' unprecedented brain enlargement allows for a greater understanding of self-control's benefits in resource division. Additionally, the development of language enabled communication about third parties, which may have enhanced the role of reputation building. Despite these differences, many of the basic emotional reactions and calculations underlying our sense of fairness seem rooted in our primate background" (2014).

This could explain the popularity of the quest for social justice. Now is the time to explore the goodness of human nature.

EMPATHY AND ALTRUISM—SUNNY PATH OF HUMAN EVOLUTION

Humans do not exist in a vacuum. They function in a community. Hence, the term coevolution is invoked. It implies something called adaptive behaviour. It may embrace conduct which depends on the context, i.e. how others will act or behave (it may concern a community, business, and political competition). Contextual adaptation enables an individual to handle different and overlapping contexts of his ego and experience interpersonal relations and social and cultural needs. Moreover, we exist only in relation to others.

The human evolutionary path is a history of togetherness, cooperation and participation. Cooperation means "shared intentions" - this is a core of morality (Tomasello, 2016). Morality is composed of empathy and caring for others (other primates share this, too) and a sense of getting what one deserves, i.e. justice (it refers solely to humans). It is believed that people developed moral behaviour as the effect of a peculiar extension of biological systems, which resulted in recognizing others and taking care of offspring, partners and others in a group (Churchland, 2012). These systems are evolutionary old. They are coded in our genome and "printed" in our brains. They are related to the human capacity to predict the future effects of actions and to make choices. Although moral decision-making results from biological relations, it is regulated by more general principles of decision-taking. It does not merely mean looking for a right choice but subjectively the best one while considering various limitations and priorities. Hence, morality is not inherent; it is only a capability since it results from very ancient (evolutionarily) nervous systems connected with emotions, particularly those related to the self-imagined effects of one's potential actions. Furthermore, it also implies a more complex mechanism created as a result of a long process of evolution, which involves the attribution of importance to our place/position in social networks and the success achieved by our social group. The history of human development proves that our survival, and certainly our well-being, most of all depend on co-operation and ensuing relations and interactions. Moral behaviour is a systemic adaptation.

Participation means that Human Being ("Me", 'I') interacts with the environment, and the act of thinking combines sensations, emotions, feelings and reasoning in an embodied and contextual way. Also, we are constantly mirroring each other [1]. In social life, noticing intentions is as important as understanding other people's emotions; they are often a key element of the context indicating the intentions of an ac-

tion. Researchers have checked whether humans can feel empathy thanks to the system of mirror neurons. Scientists noticed that mirror neurons are the most active in people who have a high level of empathy. The word compassion acquires a very literal physical meaning. Moreover, many experiments have been performed which proved that we often unconsciously imitate other people's movements because this type of "motor empathy" facilitates contacts and assures mutual acceptance. Additionally, mirror neurons allow for mimicry and understanding other people's lips and tongue movement. Combining these two skills—reading (understanding) intentions and imitating—developed into speech (Ramachandran, 2000).

Empathy is certainly a term commonly used (or even overused). It derives from the Greek *empathia*, literally, passion, from *empathēs* emotional, from *em-* + *pathos* feelings, emotion, also from the German word *Einfühlung* (ability to feel others from within). "Affective empathy" refers to the sensations and feelings we get in response to others' emotions - this can include mirroring what that person is feeling or just feeling stressed when we detect another's fear or anxiety. "Cognitive empathy," refers to our ability to identify and understand other people's emotions—cognitive imagination of 'my' experience. Empathy can lead to altruistic behaviour, but it can also give rise to feelings of distress and avoidance when confronted with another person's sufferings. Our antennae of empathy allow for entering into resonance with other people's feelings. The response can be convergent: I feel the same emotion as you feel (anger, fear and pain) or reactive, divergent response: I distance myself, and while still being concerned, I will say 'I'm sorry (...). What can I do for you? (Paul Ekman cited in Ricard, 2013, p. 41). This is a different way of dealing with someone's emotions - you can help defuse anger, fear or bitterness.

Matthieu Ricard, a monk with extensive experience with meditation, compassion and altruism [2] uses one more term - sympathy (from Greek *sympathia*, 'fellow-feeling, community of feeling'). Feelings of sympathy for someone means some degree of affinity with her or him, breaking down the barriers that separates us from them. Ricard refers to Darwin and Nancy Eisenberg when discussing sympathy as altruistic concern or compassion for another person, 'a feeling that leads us to wish that others be happy and that their condition improve' (Ricard, 2013, p. 42). He also notes that entering into affective resonance with another can help to induce altruism, but 'it is not at all necessary for me to feel what the other feels...I am not disturbed by what the other feels, but I feel concern *for* the person and for what he or she is feeling... can certainly awaken in me a more intense compassion and more active empathetic concern, because I will have clearly become aware of the other's needs through my personal experience' (Ricard, 2013, p. 43). In an empathetic state the border is important, because I should know that my feelings come from the other, but I am not confusing it with the feelings of the other. People who have difficulty with dissociating from another person's feelings can be submerged by emotional contagion and this is not empathy at all. It can be a first step to empathy, it does not help to behave in an altruistic way, since it goes together with confusion between self and others. According to practitioners (i.e. Buddhist monks), some psychologists, and neuroscientists, empathy is not enough in itself to engender altruism. Still, compassion certainly is, in essence, an altruistic mo-

tivation—we will desire the good of others and also wish to start taking action (Ricard, 2013, p. 55).

Altruism for some, may seem surprising from the perspective of natural selection, but which is likely to have evolved in human beings quite early. Altruistic behaviour is a natural, neurological phenomenon regulated by universal mechanisms in the brain. The term reciprocation describes this very well. Yet, of course, we should use the term altruism in this context very cautiously because there is a difference between psychological altruism (related to intentions) and biological altruism determined by the result of behaviour. Altruism, especially compassion, is related to the mirror mentioned above neurons, which create virtual reality – simulated thinking of another person. As said by Vilayanur Subramanian Ramachandran in a conversation with Dalai Lama: “a barrier between unreal and real co-feeling of pain and suffering of another person is our skin” (2012).

What does it mean to be human debate has a long history. In politics there is an ongoing discussion about self-interest and competition contra cooperation and reciprocity. The position we will take on this probably depends on our psychological traits (similar to seeing a glass half empty or half full). Ever since Darwin published his theory of natural selection, scientists were working out the obvious question: If living creatures evolved through competition, how did cooperation ever emerge? We are both cooperative and competitive beings, but “we are first and foremost, a social species (...) we sometimes compete to advance our interests, (...) if we stray too far from the social bond, we risk ostracization” (Rifkin, 2009, p.129). In political science, the games (Prisoner’s Dilemma, “Tit for tat”) are often invoked to show what human negotiations and reciprocity looks like. “Tit for tat”, which is based on the pure principle of reciprocation. In short, first roughly similar to animals engaged in cooperation, “you scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours”. The second is quite simple: An agent using this strategy will first cooperate, then subsequently replicate an opponent’s previous action. If the opponent previously was cooperative, the response is also cooperation. In the presence of a defector, the response is betrayal. An experiment was carried out where a game was adapted to the uncertainty of our world. In every round, players had one chance out of eight that their move would be changed into something opposite than they intended. Cooperation will change into betrayal, and vice versa. The idea was to create a messy state of mistakes and wrong decisions. It turned out that the best strategy was “turn the other cheek” behaviour; in an uncertain world, it can be best not to get angry and to forgive (Zolli & Healy, 2012, pp. 161–162).

Now, are empathy and altruism rather like a “tit for tat” game, rather a selfish act of kindness in expectation of reciprocity, or is selfless altruism really innate and commonplace? Jacques Attali writes that: “the greatest happiness is that which consists in making others happy; and, even more, in creating the conditions for the happiness of future generations. Being happy is then a very contagious disease...” (2021). It is called self-interested altruism and allows for seeds of constructive relationships to be planted into fields of politics.

Motivation for engaging in the altruistic activity is a contentious subject. Some researchers stress that there is no evidence that people help in order to feel good about

themselves, and others say that people act in this way because it mutes their empathetic distress, they feel relief and even morally better (Rifkin, 2009, p. 131). Of course, we use our common sense and personal experience to intuitively know that we cooperate when we know there will be reciprocity later. There is a concept of “altruistic punishment” (Fehr & Gächter, 2002), which occurs when an individual incurs a cost to punish in response to unfairness or a norm violation, may play a role in perpetuating cooperation. Interestingly other researchers point out three cognitive processes that contribute to the decision to altruistically punish in most scenarios: inequity aversion, cost-benefit calculation, and social reference frame to distinguish self from others. However, the effects of altruistic punishment differ considerably across cultures. Individual human beings must learn how others in their culture do things, and how those others expect them to do something.

Michael Tomasello explains that humans cooperate because they share a common objective, the attainment of which requires participants to assume different roles coordinated by concentrated attention. Humans live and operate together in institution-based cultural groups. Important is mutualism, in which we all benefit from our cooperation, but only if we work together, what we may call collaboration (2009, p. 52). “Human cooperative communication thus evolved first within the bounds of collaborative activities because these activities provided the needed common ground for establishing joint topics” (Tomasello, 2009, p. 73). Historically speaking there is a suggestion that language started as gossip, which is a way of verbalizing grooming and establishing larger social relations (Dunbar, 1996, p.78). “You scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours” is bodily activity, a means of connecting feelings, emotions, intentions and establishing social bonds. The development of language is the next big step in human collaboration.

DARK VALLEYS OF FEAR AND HATE

We now live in an increasingly dense, interconnected and complex world, and the entire system is more prone to shocks, disruptions and devastation. Worldwide pandemics of COVID-19 have made it clear. But there is more to come. The destabilizing effect of climate change, coupled with the high price of energy is leading to social and political unrest all over the world. In complex (dis)order, anything may happen, and if uncertainty, risk and danger appear to accompany our every step, if structures show symptoms of deterioration; then, we feel anxiety, fear, despair, anger, and sometimes powerlessness. Today, we are living in a state of permanent and “normalized” anxiety (Evans & Reid, 2014, p. 92). Hence, a question about responses—individual and collective—arises. It is a reasonable question in the context of politics because group emanations of dealing with anxiety appear to be a core (foundation) of politics. Our reactions may take a form of resentment, intensifying claims (pretense) converting into anger. Noradrenaline is released by the brainstem and people feel they must defend themselves (their thoughts) against the impact of others. In such a state, confrontation with opposite opinions releases the same chemical substances as in the situation of threatened survival; the limbic system is active and something called “narrow-mind-

edness” is created—the brain does not process information. In this situation, when we notice that our opinion is approved of, the defense mechanism weakens and dopamine is released—we feel better and stronger. Instinctive frustration explains waves of collective populism to a large degree.

Changes in our surroundings, especially those referring to traditional hierarchical structures, may evoke an illusion of emptiness. However, it is merely a delusion because ephemeral political movements appear in it. It somehow resembles the spread of cancer. Things which happen are “subcutaneous”, “underground” or, in other words, local or internal (Chandler, 2014, pp. 84–85). It reminds me of a fairytale about The Emperor’s New Clothes. We have become used to seeing an emperor (i.e. elites) in an armor of power and authority, and suddenly it is all gone—the ruler is exposed. Surprise and commotion occur when a child screams: “he is naked!” Now, sniff out your prey. It manifests impending revolt, unrest, violence.

Global systems appear to us as “insecurity by design”. Progress now gives way to a mess and “we are governed by Ministries of Anxiety of multiple kinds” (Evans & Reid, 2014, p. 194–195). We are often, and will be even more, surprised, confused and scared.

Living in a state of the constant threat changes the relationship between trust and risk. “Active trust”, typical of democracy and free market, transforms into “active lack of trust” (Beck, 2007, p. 34–35). A spiral of anxiety, fear and social angst is winding up. It also evokes (apparently natural) will to defend, to resist threats and be prepared for every possibility. We want to control, tighten and close. Resistance is a responsive behaviour—we are anticipating a blow, attack or strike. It is exhausting and sometimes also unreliable. Fear and anxiety increase; we feel simply physically fragile while a sense of powerlessness is intensifying too. We stare in disbelief that the policy of inhibition, prevention, and preemption of attack did not work. Perhaps it would be better to build a wall and get separated from danger? We will even fail to notice how unexpectedly danger has dug in and peers at us (Ramo, 2009, pp. 190–191).

Also, it is possible that what makes us feel good, loving and trusting—neurohormone oxytocin and its receptors—is the very same hormone in different situations causing in-group and out-group biases (tribalism). When someone is in the presence of a person who is not part of their “tribe”, it can actually increase negative feelings toward members of the “out” group. For the most part, releasing oxytocin requires one thing: another person, almost any form of social bonding or positive physical contact can trigger oxytocin. Interestingly for social unrest cases, high stress might make it so that a person feels primed to seek out more social contacts. In a more positive situation it may be that oxytocin enhances a sense of well-being and attenuates stress response. However, in a more adverse situation, oxytocin may enhance attention to the undesirable features of the experience, leading to more distress or anger, and more negative perceptions of others (Olf et al., 2013).

So, when we look at some Populist messaging, there is evidence of channelling retributive impulses and the quest for ‘righting a wrong’. Implicating the motivation to maintain justice, the positive effect appears to motivate aggressive behaviour (Gollwitzer & Bushman, 2012), and really could be sweet (rewarding) when it occurs after a provocation (or perceived affront). The angry protesting people are firmly entrenched

in their beliefs that their cause is just and their rights have been violated. The object of their anger is regarded as the offender. When we are angry (very) some of our perceptions of others are mental fabrications. The opponent is evil and oneself is right and good (Beck, 2000).

Remember mirror neurons—there is a supposition that when we watch other people’s activities, mirror neurons automatically make our own motor system active as if we are performing those activities. This seems a quite efficient mechanism for imitation and also suggests that we are automatically influenced by what we perceive - it might be a plausible neurobiological mechanism for contagion of angry behaviour. Very quickly we belong, we have friends, we are insiders and we carve divisions between “us” and “them”; we wish misfortunes befalling the outsiders.

Conflict and anger can erode people’s imagination. If all our memories and experiences are soaked in strife and bad blood—we see divisions and clashes everywhere and never-ending. Now technology (not mentioning pandemics COVID-19) allows us to have hundreds of “friends”, but this is somewhat fake and shallow compared to “real” social contacts. It’s difficult (or even impossible) to see each other eyes, facial expressions, and sharing emotions (not emoticons). We are not really connected and especially younger generations are not learning to feel empathy. Anonymity, or rather “avатарity” frees people from constraints and the flow of hate spills over the internet. Moreover social media encourages us to broadcast anger towards outsiders and for that matter for all “others”. When people publish emotionally about politics, morality, or social issues, their postings are often shared by people who already agree with them. Retweeting is tribalism incarnated. Also, the latest whistleblower’s warnings about Facebook utilizing and marketing polarized politics via services such as Facebook Groups reveal that these can encourage small, intense isolated communities, breeding even more tribal identities. Social media are not for making users happy but for keeping them online. Surprisingly it is not the same thing.

But some researchers suggest that simply remembering that groups are capable of change can break the ground for peace and kindness (Zaki, 2019, p. 73).

CONCLUSIONS—“THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING KIND”

That is the thing—our brains do change. Brain plasticity, also known as neuroplasticity, is a term that refers to the brain’s ability to change and adapt as a result of experience. Neuroplasticity is the capacity of neurons and neural networks in the brain to change their connections and behaviour in response to new information, sensory stimulation, development, damage, or dysfunction. The concept gives us hints that there is a possibility for encouraging people to be simply kind, to start cultivating a **habit** (repetitiveness is the key) of **small acts of kindness** or care for others. This may sound like a naive line from some “la la land”, but when the people live, work or play together, divisions between them fade away. The down side of it is that when you are in “living hell”, empathy and altruism are off the meter. So, in political terms it means to have the responsibility to build a system in which kindness and empathy are learned, expected and rewarded. When someone is kind, it has a big positive effect

on their physiology. It takes them out of the threat and fear mode. The warm feeling of well-being that washes over you when you've done something kind isn't just in your head. It's in your brain chemicals, too. Acts of kindness can release hormones that contribute to your mood and overall well-being. Kindness supposedly increases self-esteem, empathy and compassion and improves mood. And... **kindness can spread like a virus**". Emotional contagion can be triggered by facial expressions, indirect human interactions, and/or by observing other people's behaviour in direct and indirect interactions. The nature of the relationship between kindness and happiness seems to be obvious. "Each engenders and reinforces the other; they stem from a feeling of harmony with ourselves (...) we need to receive love in order to be able to know how to give it" (Ricard, 2013, p. 82). So, "spread love not hate" should be taken in a very literal way. What a wonderful populism this is!

Notes

[1] Mirror neurons discovered in monkeys by Italian scientists at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s are a very interesting discovery in the context of behavior and the brain. It concerned groups of motor neurons. The researchers noticed that when a monkey was doing a specific, quite complex action, a certain group of nerve cells became active, which also became active when the monkey was observing the same movement made by another monkey. Similar neurons were also discovered in humans. It means that the interpretation of observed behaviour occurs in the recipient's brain through specific simulation. Neurons enable mental "reading" and "reproducing" the behaviour of the other brain.

[2] Matthieu Ricard is a Buddhist monk, but he is also a graduate of the Institut Pasteur with PhD in molecular genetics, and moreover—with the group his fellow monks subject of numerous experiments with fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging), to analyze meditation's effect on the brain—lab results showed changes in the physiology and behaviour of the monks' brains.

[3] In result of research on neurology of trust, Paul J. Zak and Jorge A. Barraza claimed that oxytocin is responsible for many human behaviours. A series of experiments proved that human brains appear to have a function of regulating balance between egotistic conduct and prosocial tendencies. His discoveries proved a relation between empathy and a release of oxytocin (2009).

[4] The most cited example of reciprocity among animals is the vampire bat of Latin America. These bats live in groups, mainly females and their offspring. At night they hunt for blood and some of the vampire bats cannot find anything to feed on for two nights in a row, they will not survive. The starved bat will approach one of her fellows to ask for food. The other bat almost always agrees to help. The research shows that the female bats establish alliances and the bats introduced to each other gradually build up grooming relationships, and that the

rate at which bats groomed each other predicted whether they went on to donate food. The significance of these findings is that the relatively costly behaviour of food sharing is performed only after less costly ones have been reciprocated (Carter et al., 2020).

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