

The Biological Roots of Political Conflict: a Review of *Our Political Nature: The evolutionary origins of what divides us*

Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2013, 543 pp., \$15.99

C. David Navarrete¹

© Springer International Publishing AG 2017

Avi Tuschman's *Our Political Nature* (2013) is perhaps one of the best contemporary treatments of political psychology from an evolutionary perspective, broadly construed. In terms of content, it complements the contributions to the genre that Jon Haidt's *The Righteous Mind* (2012) and Weeden and Kurzban's *The Hidden Agenda of the Political Mind* (2014) have contributed, without too much overlap. But, Tuschman surveys a broader range of disciplines and topics than other authors and covers work from sociology, anthropology, neuroscience, animal behavior, game theory, psychology, political science, personality research, economics, and population and behavioral genetics. In addition, he tackles politicized issues with apolitical aplomb, even on dicey issues such as group differences in behavior, customs, and marriage patterns.

The book is sweeping in its scope, but primarily seeks to address the psychology of political ideology, and how it might be explained via insights from empirical research on the stability of political attitudes and from evolutionary biology. Not unlike Haidt's work, he uses the left-right "Liberal-Conservatism" political orientation idea as a point for his analysis. In doing so, much of the book is broadly framed within the classic "authoritarianism personality," originally conceived by "Frankfurt school" psychoanalytic devotees Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno (1949), and developed with greater psychometric precision by Bob Altemeyer (1998) and others. Not unlike earlier advocates of the authoritarian construct, he argues

that the concept is universally linked to the political right, and is a useful predictor of political attitudes.

Tuschman uses this as a point of departure for describing why our political psychology is rooted in two-primary arguments explanatory tools: (1) Personality forms the psychological basis for political orientation, primarily through the construct of authoritarianism. (2) Evolution provides the lens through which to interpret individual differences in political orientation in terms of an individual's goals and their biological function. The book assumes that people have individual and group-level preferences that they seek to realize via political strategies internalized as their ideological orientation. High authoritarians tend to be dogmatic regarding the proper way of living, xenophobic towards outsiders, and aggressive towards non-conformists of traditional values, including sexuality and gender roles. Low authoritarians tend towards openness, tolerance towards outsiders, and less prone to conformity to traditional morality and gender roles. Each personality type along this dimension has political goals commensurate with their personalities, and thus has reproductive interest in furthering their gut-level intuitions about how their societies should operate.

Not unlike other authors in this genre, Tuschman spends a good deal of ink on the phenomenon of political tribalism. Tuschman roots the left-right tension along the authoritarian dimension within the biological functions of tribalism—with adaptive themes ranging from protection from physical danger, coordination of customs, family values, traditional sexuality and gender roles, and the aversion to outbreeding so as to reinforce the benefits of cooperation within large groups of extending kin. However, he goes further in arguing that individuals in groups have interests that go beyond what could be gained in terms of resources to the ingroup. Rather, he argues that coalitional conflict emerges from the tension between the

✉ C. David Navarrete
cdn@msu.edu

¹ Department of Psychology, and the Ecology, Evolutionary Biology and Behavior Program, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI, USA

individual differences in xenophobia vs. xenophilia, and that the prejudices endemic to tribalism reflect more than basic preferences for the ingroup vs. the outgroup when all else is equal. Rather, there may exist genuine xenophilic tendencies operating alongside our more obvious psychological biases on behalf of the ingroup. It is often the case that not all bones of comparison between the ingroup and outgroup are equal, such as power differentials, and importantly, mating opportunities. For Tuschman, there are situations where it makes more biological sense to be less dogmatic about one's own customs and to embrace non-traditional sexual mores and gender roles. In other words, sometimes it pays to be less ethnocentric in one's behavior and attitudes, and as a result, perhaps even become xenophilic to some degree, particularly in the domain of mating.

In developing this argument, Tuschman steps through the tradeoffs between exogenous vs. endogenous mating using the logic of kin-selection and population genetics. The discussion on the potential adaptive utility of xenophilia is not well researched by evolutionary social scientists, and stepping the reader through such a minefield is precarious, yet this is one of the more novel themes in this book not well covered by other books of this genre.

The costs of producing offspring with close relatives are well documented, including depression in disease resistance to novel pathogens, physical deformities, and general health problems, as well as depressed intelligence and fertility. Less well studied are the benefits of xenophilia, such as when such impulses provide new opportunities for social exchange and other partnerships, exposure to new and potential useful technology, behavior, customs, warfare strategies, and of course, mating opportunities. The latter of these has staggering, potential society-wide implications as it provides for an infusion of genetic novelty that helps balance the problems with excessive inbreeding and provides important variation on which natural and cultural selection may act upon. Of course, there are important genetic costs to outbreeding, including the potential lower fertility of both parents and offspring, when differences in reproductive physiology during mating or genetic differences during segregation and recombination in meiosis cause inefficiencies in the reproductive process. And it is in this apolitical analysis of this tension where the real strengths of the book emerge. Both inbreeding and outbreeding have depressive effects on health and reproduction at the extremes, with discomfiting implications for discussions of geopolitical and immigration policy.

Considering the possibility that such important questions have roots in individual and group differences in the optimal mating strategies of individuals and groups, the current geopolitical scene in Europe is ripe for such analysis. Tuschman surveys the literature on optimal mating distance between available data for European couples and finds that when fertility is indexed as a balance between the number of children who reproduce and the number of grandchildren, the optimal

mating distance between couples is between the third and fourth cousin. Although the level of detail for calculating optimal fitness is not available for other geographic areas, there are regions where a high percentage of marriages are between couples among first and second cousins. This is especially true in the Middle East and North Africa, where the probability of marrying a second cousin or closer is above 50% in among most areas.

Importantly, the rates of consanguineous marriages are relatively uncommon in areas outside this area raises the intriguing question of whether such mating patterns are due to a different optimal mating peak in the Muslim world, relative to that established in Europe. Medical records within the UK that assess health of migrant populations find a greater incidence of congenital problems among the largest migrant groups from the Islamic world, especially Pakistanis, 55% of whom involve first cousin marriages. Tuschman points out that most environments in the Muslim world are physically harsh, with little stability in governments or institutions, such that what little wealth families may scrape together are difficult to stably invest for economic growth, and are difficult to be passed between generations. This may have led to the cultural evolution of consanguinity to increase the level and stability of resource acquisition and maintenance, with extended families as the primary locus of resource and reproductive effort. The costs of inbreeding depression in health, intelligence, and fertility are balanced by the benefits of increased genetic relatedness among extended families in a world where trust in outside institutions is not as profitable as the fitness resulting from trusting the members of one's own tribe, even as a source of mating resources. Sadly, this may make functional sense in terms of biological fitness in one's home environment, and such tradeoffs may be relevant to understanding the challenges that tribalism poses to development and stability of political and economic institutions in the Muslim world, integration of migrants in the West, congenital health problems, and the development of the skills and education necessary to be competitive in the workplaces of modern economies and an ever-increasingly connected and complex world. In some respects, we may truly be experiencing a clash of civilizations that runs much deeper than culture.

Tuschman also analyzes political attitudes towards authority and hierarchy, and how that is indicative of an underlying personality and biological orientation. Like other writers, he notes that deferring to authority tends to be a conservative political disposition and being anti-authoritarian tends to be a liberal disposition. This is expressed as a general tolerance/intolerance of inequality, with which high and low authoritarians prefer. Such attitudes are also linked to concomitant beliefs regarding the myth of meritocracy and the belief in a just world. The author also discusses the differences in politics within the family, which is said to vary as a function of birth-order. In particular, later born children are said to be

more prone to anti-authoritarian attitudes as a niche specialization strategy to counter the strategies of the “establishment” relationship between first borns and their parents. Tuschman also describes the evolutionary logic of sibling rivalry, kin group altruism, reciprocal altruism as well as more recently modeled forms of reputation-based forms of prosocial behavior. In addition, Tuschman touches on the altruism of heroic rescuers, but rather disappointingly, concludes that it does not fit well within an evolutionary framework.

Tuschman finalizes the analyses with the notion of self-deception as the ultimate tool of a sophisticated political psychology—one equally employed by partisans on the right and the left in forming coalitions against their political rivals. These ancillary analytical tools are interesting, and are widely accepted ways of interpreting our political psychology from an evolutionary perspective. Readers unfamiliar with the primary research in this area may learn a lot about research in psychology and of the game-theoretic logic of cooperation and conflict. The author masterfully pulls together a broad range of empirical and theoretical work into readable and coherent prose, and is clearly gifted in his ability to do so. But to be sure, the brilliance of Tuschman’s book lies primarily in his analysis of tribalism, and in his bold treatment of the nuanced research on the tension between xenophobia and xenophilia in shaping our political nature.

A few things could have been done better in the book. Taking a broadly evolutionary stance sometimes leads to a lack of precision in distinguishing between the behavioral ecology versus the evolutionary psychology of our political nature. Tuschman often speaks of the goals of political beliefs and attitudes as being directly linked to biological fitness maximizing, instead of the evolved psychological mechanisms that necessarily operate between goals and outcomes. Humans are best described as processors of algorithms, heuristics, and programs resulting from the design features of the mind. We are “adaptation executors” rather than “fitness maximizers” in terms of our evolved psychology. Failing to keep such concepts distinct leaves certain aspects of human behavior mysterious, as witnessed by in Tuschman’s befuddlement with the phenomenon of altruistic heroism. As adaptation executors rather than fitness maximizers, it is less perplexing that selfless heroes might not have the kinds of fitness outcomes commensurate with the good they yield to grateful third parties. The psychological mechanisms that give rise to heroic selflessness can be understood in terms of the expected fitness outcomes of individuals executing the decision rules of such

mechanisms under a range of recurrent conditions most commonly encountered in the environments in which those mechanisms evolved. Outliers on the selfishness-selflessness dimension are not problematic from this perspective.

Lastly, the emphasis on authoritarianism seems slightly outdated and not entirely unbiased. This may be less a fault of an efficient author seeking to minimize complexity and more likely the unfortunate byproduct of ideological bias in the social sciences, as most of the work frames authoritarianism as inherently bad, is arbitrarily contrasted with positive traits of those on the opposite pole, and is linked exclusively with right leaning political institutions in the West. There is certainly something to the notion of authoritarianism as a predictor of political attitudes, but the desirable aspects of the syndrome and the negative aspects of opposite have yet to be fully fleshed out. For example, the notion of “authoritarian aggression” could perhaps be fairly characterized as “egalitarian cowardice” if the poles were flipped. More importantly, studies emerging primarily in Eastern Europe (e.g., De Regt et al. 2011) suggest that the dogmatism, aggressiveness, and traditionalism of authoritarianism may be as readily applied towards enforcing the goals of left-wing belief systems as much as those of the right. An informed approach to the history of totalitarian regimes as well as the current culture wars regarding free speech and political correctness provides real-world examples of this possibility. Minor tweaking in framing the content of future editions of this otherwise excellent book could readily address such concerns.

References

- Adorno, T.W., Frenkel-Brunswik, E., Levinson, D.J., & Sanford, R.N. (1950). *The authoritarian personality* (pp. 228). New York: Harper and Row.
- Altemeyer, B. (1988). *Enemies of Freedom: Understanding Right-Wing Authoritarianism*. Mississauga: Jossey-Bas.
- De Regt, S., Mortelmans, D., & Smits, T. (2011). Left-wing authoritarianism is not a myth, but a worrisome reality. Evidence from 13 Eastern European countries. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 44(4), 299–308.
- Haidt, J. (2012). *The righteous mind: why good people are divided by politics and religion*. New York: Vintage.
- Tuschman, A. (2013). *Our political nature: the evolutionary origins of what divides us*. New York: Prometheus Books.
- Weeden, J., & Kurzban, R. (2014). *The hidden agenda of the political mind: How self-interest shapes our opinions and why we won't admit it*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.