SUNDAY OPINION

ANNE APPLEBAUM

When populist rhetoric meets Italian reality

All across Milan, condolences rain down upon the head of the traveler bound for Rome. One Milanesi friend showed me photographs, sent by his niece, of the garbage that hasn't been cleared from the Roman streets. Another told me to watch out for the smell: "If you haven't been there for a long time, prepare for a shock." The expressions of concern are dispensed with just a touch of glee, for Rome, unlike Milan, is now ruled by a mayor from the Five Star Movement. This newish Italian political party was founded by a professional comedian who used to describe politicians as "parasites," whose leaders rail against the "establishment" and whose electoral lists were filled with people who had never before run for office. Swept into power on a wave of anger, the Five Star Movement has now crashed against some immovable obstacles, one of which is the sanitation department of the city of Rome.

The Five Star Movement controls more than Rome, of course. It also runs the Italian government in partnership with its unlikely coalition partner, the League. The two parties disagree about many things, perhaps most things, from appointments to the economy. But they do have one thing in common: Neither seems to know how, exactly, the revolutionary changes they have promised are going to be carried out. This conundrum matters well beyond Italy, for there is a lot of revolutionary language to be heard on European airwaves at the moment and not a lot of actual change to accompany it.

Part of the problem is just inexperience. It's all very well to condemn the entire political class, the entire business class, the medical profession, the legal profession and the universities. But how do you run the government without any of those people? The Bolsheviks faced this same problem a century ago, first slaughtering the old guard (not an option in modern Europe) and then desperately seeking to co-opt the ones who survived. The Five Star Movement has chosen instead to elect outsiders, sometimes rather random outsiders, which is fair enough: Politics has always renewed itself that way. But it has also chosen to immediately put some of them in charge of massive bureaucracies. That was what happened to Virginia Raggi, the shaky mayor of Rome; that's also what happened to Five Star's current leader, Luigi Di Maio, a former stadium usher who never completed a formal education and turned 33 on Saturday. Currently, he is deputy prime minister, as well as minister for economic development, labor and social policies, and he's finding it difficult to cope.

Even trickier is the matter of alliances both within Italy and outside. At his office in Rome, Gianluigi Paragone, a Five Star senator with a big media presence, told me at length about the international financial system and the damage it's doing to Italy, as well as the unfairness of the European single market, in which companies can choose to get cheaper labor in the Czech Republic or lower taxes in Ireland. Asked for solutions, he said they were all political: "If we want to have a real European politics, you need a real central European bank [and] . . . a European constitution."

In other words, an anarchic, anti-party party that sometimes sounds virulently Eurosceptic wants . . . more Europe, more coordination, stronger central institutions and unified taxes, all goals that Five Star is uniquely unsuited to achieve. Most European political parties belong to cross-European groupings, sister parties with whom they pursue joint goals. But Five Star can't find any allies. Paragone couldn't name any; the party's European parliamentarians remain nonaligned.

Unsurprisingly, Five Star's support is beginning to drift away. Its support dropped by half in European Parliament elections at the end of May, while votes for its coalition partner rose. The League has stayed popular thanks to the unique ability of its leader, Interior Minister Matteo Salvini, to dominate news headlines. He does so by making outrageous statements, mostly about immigration, and using his position to create news happenings, among them the recent arrest of a boat captain who rescued migrants from the sea.

But this method of doing politics might also have a short life span. The number of migrants coming from the Middle East and North Africa has plummeted since 2015. The crisis is over. And many of the actual problems of Italy, from youth unemployment to government debt, can be solved, once again, only with the help of experts, allies or sometimes the European institutions Salvini also loves to rail against. If he can keep people distracted until the next election, he might well win big. But if reality, in the form of garbage or something else, suddenly starts to matter, then his party might meet the fate of the Five Star Movement, too.

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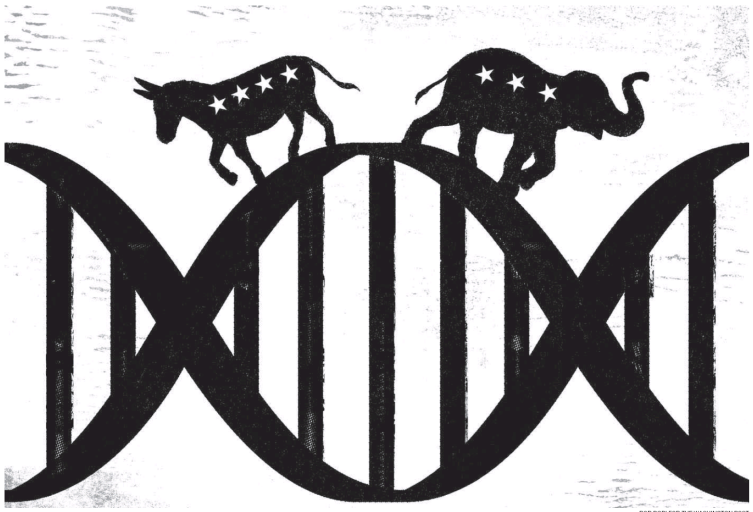

ROB DOBI FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Our politics are in our DNA

BY SEBASTIAN JUNGER

Many people balk at the idea that we are a product of evolution. On some level, they acknowledge that humans are social primates with a particular evolutionary heritage, but if you drill down far enough into their personal preferences — Why do you have a sweet tooth? Why do you vote a certain way? — their explanations veer into self-determination. They like sugar or vote Republican because they choose to — it's what makes them them.

Given how natural selection works, it's entirely possible that an aversion to evolutionary explanations is in itself a product of evolution. In a hostile environment, wouldn't a belief in self-determination be adaptive? But no matter, the point is that anti-evolutionary bias makes rational discussion of the human race far more difficult.

This particular bias is prevalent at both ends of the political spectrum for different reasons. Cultural conservatives often reject the theory of evolution because it elbows aside the proposition that God created humans in his own image. Secular liberals, on the other hand, have a different agenda. They are comfortable with a godless universe but can balk at the prospect of living in a society that is deeply influenced by biological realities. Worldwide phenomena such as aggression and warfare are ascribed to culture — rather than genetics or biology — because to do otherwise would be to give up, as it were, on the struggle for social justice.

But many progressives who reject, for example, biological differences between the genders happily watch Olympic competitions that carefully separate women from men so that testosterone differentials do not result in men sweeping nearly every contest. And cultural conservatives who reject any biological explanation of human origins are happy to take medicine that works biologically to treat their illnesses and alleviate their suffering.

Given these sensitivities, the most inflammatory proposition of all may be that our political views could be substantially influenced by genetics. No other proposition so exquisitely combines the logical blind spots of both liberals and conservatives with the cauldron of political passion that bubbles within us.

Politics is an emotional topic because people feel they have arrived at their conclusions through deep moral reasoning. It's not just a collection of policy opinions and problem-solving strategies; it's a core philosophy that goes straight to a person's identity. And because moral reasoning feels both noble and incontrovertible, few people want to be told that these sacred conclusions are profoundly influenced by genetics.

The effect of genetics is so strong, however, that according to empirical studies, identical twins who are raised apart are more likely to hold similar political views than fraternal twins who are raised together. According to Avi Tuschman, author of "Our Political Nature," between 40 and 60 percent of the variance in our political attitudes is heritable, stemming from genetic differences between individuals; the rest comes from our environment, especially during our formative years. Political opinion also relates to brain structure: An experiment measuring the sizes of the anterior cingulate and the right amygdala accurately predicted a person's political orientation 72 percent of the time. Some of these political proclivities appear to be connected to Chromosome 4 in a neurotransmitter receptor called NARGI.

The fact that political opinion is rooted to some degree in our genes and biology means that both liberalism and conservatism may be adaptive traits that got passed down through thousands of human generations because they helped us survive. But another trait that is clearly adaptive is our ability to get along. Political arguments may rage within families, communities and even nations, yet they only rarely threaten the cohesion of the group. On some level, humans seem to understand that differences of opinion are unpleasant but splitting up may be even more unpleasant — or downright dangerous. Humans don't survive alone in nature.

Today, many people are concerned that the United States is splitting along ideological lines. With no credible enemy to encourage unity, the country finds itself in a deep political argument in which both liberals and conservatives accuse the other of not only being wrong but of being a threat to the country. The real threat to the country, of course, is bellicose, divisive rhetoric. But this is where evolution might throw Americans a lifeline.

If liberalism and conservatism are partly rooted in genetics, then those worldviews had to have been adaptive — and necessary — in our evolutionary past. That means that neither political party can accuse the other of being illegitimate or inherently immoral; we are the way we are for good reason. Every human society must do two things: It must be strong enough to protect itself from outside groups, and it must be fair enough to avoid internal conflict. A society entirely composed of liberals risks being overrun by enemies, and a society entirely composed of conservatives risks breaking apart over issues of inequality — "social justice," as it's now termed.

Put those groups together, however, and you have addressed the two greatest threats to human welfare: enemies and discord. The task for every society, from the earliest Homo sapiens of Africa to Americans of the 21st century, is to accommodate different values and worldviews into one ethos. It's not easy to do, but our own genetic diversity clearly demonstrates that it's possible. Otherwise, one set of values would have gradually dominated the other until there was no political discord at all, just a broad, flat uniformity. That may sound appealing at the moment. But in the long term, what a great loss that would be.

Sebastian Junger is the author of "Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging." This piece is adapted from the foreword to the paperback edition of Avi Tuschman's "Our Political Nature," to be published this summer.

Breaking the silence and shame of pregnancy loss

BY LEANA S. WEN

The turkey sandwich I always had for lunch tasted different. My colleague's perfume was suddenly overpowering. I could hardly keep awake; when I slept, I had leg cramps and vivid dreams.

I knew before I took the test: I was pregnant.

I was thrilled. My husband and I had been trying for months. We wanted another child, a sibling for our son, Eli, now almost 2. I'm 36; my husband is 44; we didn't want to wait much longer. Though I worried about how I would do my demanding job with two small children, I also believed that fulfilling my deep desire to expand our family would send a strong message for the organization I represent: We support all people in their decisions when and whether to become parents.

We got more and more excited as we planned for Baby No. 2. If it was a girl, we had a name picked out; if it was a boy, we'd have to go through the baby-name books again. We measured the spare room to turn it into a nursery. We started teaching Eli to be more gentle. I began to plan my maternity leave.

Then, just as suddenly as they'd come on, my nausea, exhaustion and other symptoms went away. I knew even before I went to my doctor that I'd had a pregnancy loss.

When the test results confirmed it, I felt numb. Then I felt the guilt. I knew this was not rational — as many as 1 in 5 pregnancies result in miscarriage, with unsurvivable genetic issues as a major cause of early pregnancy loss. In the emergency room, I've counseled many patients who suffered miscarriages. I told myself what I've told dozens of women and families, that no one knows what caused the miscarriage, and there's nothing that could have been done differently. Yet, I couldn't stop the self-blame: Was it all the travel? Was it the late nights? What if I'd had less stress?

A few days later, I was on a work trip when I started having heavy bleeding and cramping. At the same time I was going through my miscarriage, I was being asked to respond to the breaking story of 27-year-old Marshae Jones facing manslaughter charges (later dropped) for undergoing the same bodily process. Someone shot her in the belly, resulting in her miscarriage, and — incredibly — she was the one accused of a crime. As I spoke, it was hard for me to hold back my tears. How would I have felt if I were Jones — suffering severe bodily harm and mourning the loss of a potential life, while at the same time facing the prospect of imprisonment?

Over the past several months, I'd been on the front lines of the fight against dozens of extreme legislative efforts to ban abortion care. Now, I pictured myself as a woman having a miscarriage in Alabama, Missouri and Georgia. Not only have these states passed bans on abortion early in pregnancy, before many women even know that they're pregnant, but their new laws also would allow the investigation of women who have had miscarriages to determine whether they, in fact, had an abortion. To be enforceable, any laws that criminalize doctors in this way would require that women be investigated. What cruelty would that be, to compound the trauma of my miscarriage with the indignity of a government investigation into my personal medical records?

If pregnant people are too terrified to seek medical care, they will be forced to make impossible trade-offs, at the cost of their health and lives.

Already, in recent years in Tennessee, Wisconsin, Alabama and numerous other states, women have been arrested for endangering their pregnancies by using addictive substances, or falling down the stairs, or taking medications legally prescribed by their doctors. In 2012 in Pennsylvania, Jennifer Whalen brought her 16-year-old daughter to the ER because she was having bleeding and cramping. In the hospital, Whalen admitted that she helped her daughter obtain an abortion by purchasing pills on the Internet. Eventually, she was arrested, convicted and received a jail sentence of nine to 18 months.

If pregnant people are too terrified to seek medical care, they will be forced to make impossible trade-offs, at the cost of their health and lives. I once treated a woman in her late 20s who had a miscarriage complication. If she'd received care early, she could have had a simple outpatient procedure. But by the time she came to the ER, she had such a severe infection that she had to have a hysterectomy and was in the ICU for weeks. My patient suffered serious injury and almost died because she didn't have health insurance — a situation no one should face — just as no one should have to decide how close to death she needs to be to risk imprisonment for health care.

I was able to return home and visit my regular doctor to receive follow-up care. As I recover over the Fourth of July weekend with my family, I decided to write about my experience because I want to break the silence and shame that often come with pregnancy loss. I also write because my miscarriage has made my commitment to women's health even stronger. If we truly care about the health of women, children and families, we must commit to policies that provide pregnant women with the care, humanity and dignity that all people deserve.

The writer is an emergency physician and the president and chief executive of Planned Parenthood Federation of America.