PETER BEATTIE
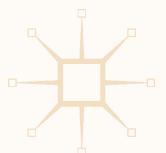
SOCIAL EVOLUTION,

POLITICAL PSYCHOLOGY,

AND THE MEDIA

IN DEMOCRACY

THE INVISIBLE HAND IN THE
U.S. MARKETPLACE OF IDEAS

Social Evolution, Political Psychology, and the Media in Democracy

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"If I were to tell you that someone has written a book that melds together ideas about information dissemination consumption, evolutionary psychology, and a normative critique of the American media, you might not believe it was possible. But you'd be wrong. *Social Evolution, Political Psychology, and the Media in Democracy* explains how humans think, what they believe, what they hear, and why it is often bad for American democracy. But he also offers us a way forward through a comparison with other countries. In today's politically deteriorating environment, we need a book like this."
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—Jason Hickel, *Lecturer of Anthropology at Goldsmiths, University of London, Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, and author of* The Divide: A Brief Guide to Global Inequality and its Solutions

Peter Beattie

Social Evolution, Political Psychology, and the Media in Democracy

The Invisible Hand in the U.S. Marketplace of Ideas

palgrave
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Dedicated to young women and men

…very wise men, perhaps quite worthy to govern, have written in France, Spain and England on the administration of states. Their books have done much good: not that it corrected the ministers who were in office when the book appeared, for a minister does not and cannot correct himself. He has reached his full status. No more instruction, no more advice. He has not the time to listen to them, the tide of business carries him away. But these good books form the young men destined for office, they form the princes, and the second generation is educated.

—Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*, "States, governments: which is the best?"

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Introduction: Why Democracy Is Not Working

"What kind of truth is this which is true on one side of a mountain and false on the other?"
—Michel de Montaigne, *Essays*

Planes struck the towers while I was in the shower. A roommate was downtown taking photographs and, in the rudest way, received information about what would later be called "9/11"; he witnessed dozens of people choose the brief terror of jumping over the prospect of burning alive. I was blissfully ignorant for an hour. As I walked from Alphabet City to Washington Square, two miles from the World Trade Center, I missed the relevant information—"change blindness" prevented me from noticing the Twin Towers were missing from the skyline. Even as I witnessed streams of businesspeople walking north, truth eluded me. (Those whose proximity to the collapse had covered them in soot were further downtown.) It was the day of the mayoral primaries, and I interpreted the unusual migration as a trip to the polls. What a turnout, what a day for democracy!

Information about the attack only reached me from fellow students as I arrived at class and even then, much was false: Planes had hit the White House! Another attack was on the way! I tried to call my father, in the Financial District for a conference, but the cell phone network was overwhelmed. Instead, I walked to an apartment near Union Square, where, uncoordinated, friends were converging. There, as most of them walked to a nearby hospital to donate blood (there were too many would-be

donors), I saw CNN's coverage of what had happened two miles away. For billions, the news media would be their *only* source of information.

I remember the week after 9/11 as an unusual time. Strangers made eye contact and daily interactions were gentler. The stress of daily life was subdued, not augmented, by the mass murder. It was as if the toxic smoke from the ruins were soporific. Parks were filled with spontaneous memorials, chalk drawings, and posters with a theme so common I only found it remarkable later[1]: peace. I saw calls for resilience, understanding, to avoid violent retribution, remembering and honoring the dead by putting an end to violence.

Not so on television. The news was jarring, like entering an alternate universe where mourning and the desire for peace were replaced by rage and the desire for retribution. And fear, pervasive fear. The fear spread by the news media took root across the country, creating a sharp distinction between how New York City and the United States reacted. (Fear even snuck into my apartment—a month later, I bought gas masks for roommates and myself, should a poison gas attack force us escape across the Williamsburg Bridge.) This was my introduction to the media's power, my first intimation of the difference between mediated and unmediated reality.

There was a question on everyone's mind: Why do they hate us? The easiest answer, one found with only a remote control, was *freedom*. "They" hate "us" for our freedom. As a college student, I had the time and resources to engage in more effortful searches. The answers I found in books, magazines, the alternative and international press, community radio, and documentaries were less pat than freedom-hatred. These answers attacked my identity, how I saw myself as a member of a nation devoted to justice and democracy. They were answers—true or false— that never reached more than a small minority of my compatriots.

But why did this information reach me and not everyone? How did so many others around me come to have ideas so different from mine? These questions made me look at ideas anew. What are ideas? Fundamentally: information. Ideas are bits of information generated in or communicated to human minds, which combine, change, and spread. One's beliefs are simply ideas—often what one was taught as a child. The mind may be mysterious, but it is not magical: it cannot survey all ideas and choose the best. The mind can only embrace ideas it is exposed to by others, or create new ideas from pieces of other ideas. Gore Vidal once put it that Montaigne wrote "about what he had been reading *which became himself*."[2] Who we are—our identities and beliefs—is largely

information we absorbed from our environments. Hence the distribution of the world's religions: Catholics are disproportionately those whose parents were Catholics, Hindus those who were raised Hindu and so on.

It is not only religious ideas that we hold for reasons of geographical accident. There are few French nationalists among those born and raised in Ethiopia, just as there are few monarchists born and raised in the USA. Our political ideas, like our religious ideas, are powerfully influenced by mere geography.

Why do we believe what we believe about politics? Our parents are a primary influence, as are schools, churches, and friends. And, finally: the books and newspapers we read, the television we watch and internet sites we visit. Outside of these sources, what do we have? The news media provides the majority of us with nearly all the information we have about the world outside of our social circles. Whether that information is worthy of trust depends on the nature of the media system we have access to; citizens of North Korea would be wise to distrust information coming from their media system, while citizens of the United States can be confident that a far greater percentage of the information from theirs trustworthy. After all, the U.S. government does not actively censor the press and journalists are trained to be as objective as possible. Yet there are reasons for doubt. There need not be a conscious, coordinated policy *à la* North Korea for a media system to display a propagandistic character. Unconscious or unintentional mechanisms abound: political-economic pressures, ideological uniformity among the owners of media companies or journalists, and a reliance on government sources for information are candidates. Even "culture" is a candidate: norms, routines, common sense, conventional wisdom, and what "it just wouldn't do to say" or write. Hence even in relatively free and open media systems, healthy skepticism is required.

Such unconscious mechanisms are capable of producing bias that eerily mimics conscious propaganda. Before and during the second US war on Iraq, the U.S. public largely believed the war justified because Iraq posed a serious threat to national security. Yet the majority of the world's people outside of the United States believed the war unjustified. Simply, the U.S. media was more accepting of the U.S. government's position than media systems globally. The result: the U.S. public believed falsehoods and most of the rest of the world did not.[3] What was true on our side of the Pacific and Atlantic was false on the others—and, as recognized by even Republican candidates for president in 2016, our "truth" was false.

Such dependence on the news media strikes us as unpleasant, even embarrassing. The more comfortable and reassuring thought is that we choose what to believe. And we do, but we are *not* free to accept or reject ideas we never see or hear. Herein lies the power of the news media.

A commonsense rebuttal to claims about a powerful media is that there is no evidence of any conspiratorial cabal using the media to mislead the public; rather, the U.S. media (among others) is composed of fair-minded professional journalists able to write and speak freely; that they are often adversarial toward government and corporations and tend toward the liberal side of the U.S. political spectrum; that the United States is an open society without censorship, in which citizens can read, watch, say, or believe what they please. Therefore, those concerned about media power are likely to be adherents of ideological persuasions outside the mainstream, upset their ideology has failed to gain wider acceptance. Each of these points of rebuttal is correct. Only, they are correct in themselves but do not constitute a rebuttal. This book explains why.

It explains how an "invisible hand" creates a *de facto* propaganda system within the American marketplace of ideas. A conspiracy is unnecessary to explain the constricted supply of information within our open society: psychological, commercial, and political pressures suffice. As Adam Smith might put it: "It is not from the malevolence of the politician, the journalist, the media owner, or the audience that a propaganda system is created, but from their regard to their own interests—and, from their psychology."

This book will argue that the news media has a power rivaling any branch of government. It suggests that to be consistent with democracy, the power of media, like the power of government, must be submitted to democratic control—and not merely to the polyarchic plutocracy of the market. Otherwise, we must admit that ours is a sham democracy disguising an oligarchy. Or, simply a democracy in disrepair.

Explanations for this sorry state can be grouped into two broad categories. The Right insists human nature is profoundly flawed: "out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made," according to Immanuel Kant. Our ideal forms of government cannot help but fall short of their goals, because human nature is corrupt, selfish, and tainted with evil. Hence democracy, which Churchill called "the worst form of government, except for all those other forms," is failing of necessity. Our fallen nature can do no better, though it could do worse.

On the Left, it is argued that democracy fails only when impeded by external forces. Human nature is suited to self-government and would produce wonderful results if allowed time to flourish under true democracy. The Left's diagnosis for the present democratic deficit is the impediment imposed by wealthy individuals and corporations. This, not any failings of human nature, is what is preventing democracy from achieving its potential.

Evolutionary and social psychology have shown that we are animals that evolved to cooperate with members of our groups and compete with other groups. Our brains are designed with biases and prejudices to facilitate this cooperation and competition—not to think with the rationality and objectivity of philosophers. We know that humanity is crooked timber: far from the liberal ideal of rationality, *Homo sapiens* has an evolved mind riddled with biases that skew perceptions and political thinking. But while our nature seems fallen by comparison with an imagined, Edenic ideal, it does not warrant the Right's pessimism any more than the Left's optimism. Our nature is Janus-faced: we have a competitive, selfish heritage from our distant simian forebears and a cooperative, group-focused heritage that emerged when our lineage diverged from that of chimpanzees. What separates our species from our closest relatives is an impressive ability to cooperate, but we still share much of their selfish and competitive instincts.

A diverse array of scientific studies provides an understanding of how the media[4] exerts political power. Unlike in the realm of law, where successful arguments are built on persuasive reasoning and the accumulated authority of judges and legislators, scientific study is constrained only by what we can observe. When a chemist says that two chemicals produce an effect if combined, we are not constrained to believe on the strength of the chemist's authority; we are invited to see for ourselves. Hence the motto of England's Royal Society: *nullius in verba*, "nothing in words" or "take no one's word for it." Not all science is as simple as chemistry, however; more complicated areas of study, like human societies, do not allow for pure experiments. There are always extraneous, uncontrolled factors in even the most careful social psychological experiment. And many social questions do not allow experimentation, in which case "science" refers to its older, broader definition: a systematic study that creates knowledge to explain or predict aspects of the world. Regardless, as much for chemistry as sociology, how we *interpret* science, and what our interpretations tell us about how we might better organize ourselves

socially, politically, or economically, is open to debate. I mean to build here only a *prima facie* case for the power of media in politics, using the findings of scientists from several fields. Though I have not yet encountered one, a counterargument could be made that reinterprets the same findings, and others, weaving them into an opposing narrative that more satisfyingly explains the whole. (I would welcome such a counterargument, especially if it provides reassurance that democracy, in a form substantially faithful to its ideal of citizens sharing equally in political power, presently exists in the United States.)

To make this argument, first a theory of information in society—ideas, beliefs—is needed. The first chapter explores three such theories: social evolution, which ties *social* information to broader conceptions of information at the root of physical existence and the evolutionary process; schema theory, which conceptualizes how the human brain absorbs, processes, and stores information; and social representations theory, which explains and explores how large chunks of socially shared information disseminate through a population. These approaches cover three ascending levels, from the individual bit of information, to the information within an individual brain, to the sets of information widely shared within a society. Combining them, the resulting approach views ideas as bits of information that evolve and spread, in an ecology of information featuring selection pressures of various sorts: psychological, cultural, political-economic.

The first chapter explains why this perspective is reasonable, and what explanatory benefits it has for an understanding of politics. While it illuminates much about the realm of ideas, it cannot predict or even fully explain why some ideas spread widely and other ideas do not. This theoretical approach can only sketch the complex system that is the world of ideas or the ecology of information. But to understand the system overall, it is necessary to investigate the main forces in operation *within* the ecology of information.

The forces at play within the evolution of political ideas can be divided into categories of demand and supply. "Demand" encompasses everything about the human brain that makes some ideas likelier to be absorbed or accepted, retained and retransmitted. For example, memory would be a demand force or bias: *ceteris paribus*, a small amount of information is likelier to spread than a large amount. (Accordingly, the understanding of a "meme" as an entertaining picture-and-joke on the internet has spread further than the definition of the meme as the basic

unit of the evolutionary algorithm as applied to the realm of ideas.) "Supply" encompasses any influence making some ideas likelier to be disseminated by the biggest supplier of information, the media (or smaller suppliers, from churches to schools). For example, libel laws are a supply force or bias: *ceteris paribus*, information that carries the risk of a libel lawsuit is less likely to be disseminated than information carrying no such risk.

To understand demand biases, we need to understand the human mind, how it evolved, and how its evolutionary history affects political cognition. To understand our psychology, the second chapter begins with the emergence of hominids, through the point when our species branched from our hominid cousins, to our development of sedentary agriculture and large civilizations. This chapter describes the marks evolutionary history left on our psychology, including our capacity for morality and political cognition. One of the most striking anomalies of human evolution was the emergence of large-scale cooperation (eusociality), a phenomenon common in ants and wasps but few other species. To produce this anomaly, unique ecological conditions were required and several psychological capacities had to develop. Once in place, these capacities produced their own ecology of human minds in which information (ideas, technologies, languages, and religions) could evolve. These distinct but interlinked evolutionary systems—the biological and the informational or ideational—have produced everything that makes us human. This includes political ideologies: gene-culture coevolution has produced predispositions—weak though they may be alone—that make some inclined toward left-wing ideas and others to right-wing ideas. That is, our genes help to produce a *psychological* Left and Right, or "elective affinities" toward certain ideas. Thereby, our evolutionary history lives on in the design of our minds, producing an "evolutionarily stable strategy" helping some ideas, practices, and institutions to persist (the psychological Right), while providing a laboratory of innovation for potential improvements (the psychological Left).

The third chapter examines more direct demand biases, exploring what the field of social psychology can tell us about our psychology on matters of social and political importance. Today's globally dominant political philosophy is liberalism, born before evolutionary theory and psychology. Liberalism's view of human capacities looks naïve today[5]: in contrast to the liberal assumption of human rationality, our psychology is

ridden with irrational biases that interfere with an ideally rational way of learning and thinking about politics. This chapter focuses on biases likely to affect how we construct our political worldviews using the information about the outside world we receive from the media: from in-group bias to the system justification tendency. Even if our media systems were designed to offer an objective and bias-free *supply* of political information from diverse perspectives, demand-side biases may nonetheless distort the way information from the news media is received, processed, and remembered. Hence a democracy-appropriate media system must present information in a way that mutes or reduces our social-psychological biases.

Arriving at the question of media power, the fourth chapter surveys what we have discovered about how information moves from the news media into our minds. The conventional wisdom for decades in social science was that the media produces minimal effects on opinions. But if the theoretical approach laid out in the first chapter is correct, this cannot be: information is physical and must be transported from where it originates in political events, legislation, and research before it can reach our minds. As such, the media's effects simply cannot be minimal. The overwhelming weight of recent research demonstrates this: that the media has a pervasive sway on political opinions and understandings. From advertising and entertainment programming to the news, it shapes what we believe about the wider world. It can persuade, prime, frame, set the political agenda, and shape political opinions. It can facilitate or impede spirals of silence, ideological segregation and polarization, and the acquisition of political knowledge. While the media is far from a brainwashing "influencing machine" or a hypodermic needle capable of injecting ideas into our minds, it is nonetheless the greatest influence on public opinion, as it is the conduit through which the building blocks of public opinion are transported. Therefore, biases in the *supply* of information are likely to translate into biases in our political knowledge, from which we construct our understanding of the political world and act in it.

Whereas the second and third chapters examine the "demand side" of political information, the fifth chapter examines the "supply side." It investigates the political economy of media: the factors by which information is included in, or excluded from, the supply offered us by the news media. Regardless of whether we are perfectly rational or systematically biased, what determines the *supply* of information can affect the understandings we end up with. Beginning with a short history of the media

and how it developed, this chapter concludes that while the media ideally should provide a free "marketplace of ideas" or an open public sphere, several political-economic forces frustrate that ideal. These include ownership concentration, an economic process of creative destruction currently light on creation, ideological bias, commercial and political pressures, and cultural and institutional influences. In combination, these supply-side biases produce a media system that not only fails to counteract our evolved psychological biases, but compounds them.

If the United States were the only country in the world, we could draw little from examining its media system: innate psychological limitations might make ideal conceptions of a public sphere or marketplace of ideas impossible dreams of political theorists. The variety of media systems globally allows us to compare their outcomes, further testing the causal link between the media and political ideas. The sixth chapter examines the ways different countries have designed and regulated their media systems. It traces differences between levels of political knowledge across countries to differences in how their respective media systems have been structured, particularly regarding the degree of commercialization and level of investment in public service media. These comparisons suggest best practices to make media systems better live up to the ideal role they should play in a democracy: providing a free, fair, and open marketplace of ideas.

Finally, the conclusion analyzes how deficiencies in the US media have translated into deficiencies in political practice. As people have often said about communism, democracy is a wonderful theory, but in practice it is doomed to failure—without a well-functioning media system.

The question of the media is of the utmost political importance. The news media is our lifeline to participation in the political realm; it is the telescope through which learn about our place in the universe, or the microscope through which we learn of what we are made. A network of salons, coffee shops, and a community of the literate comprised the first public sphere, which provided the impetus and the foundation for the rise of liberal democracies. Today, the public sphere has enlarged and diversified along with the franchise, and the modern mass media is its primary constituent. Dire social problems can be solved in a dictatorship, so long as the dictator is benevolent, well informed, and has the power to enforce policies. In a democracy, however, a majority of voters must be knowledgeable or problems can go unaddressed or intensify. Yet informed observers warn that "[t]he political ignorance of the

American voter is one of the best-documented features of contemporary politics…"[6] The invisible hand in our distorted marketplace of ideas is malfunctioning.

As *Homo sapiens*, we face dire political problems that may, if unaddressed, prove fatal. There are enough nuclear weapons on the planet to destroy most forms of life, and their use remains just one serious provocation or accident away. The threat of non-nuclear warfare is not so profound, yet one is hard pressed to find a war anywhere that is not a fundamentally senseless loss of life and cause of unjustifiable suffering. The way we organize ourselves economically is such that tens of thousands die every day due to lack of food, a mere distributional problem that nonetheless claims more lives in a day than terrorism does in a year. Meanwhile, even in those limited geographical areas favored by the global distribution system, where food grows on pace with asset prices, despair abounds with suffocating poverty amidst unprecedented wealth.

And then there is perhaps the greatest threat, climate change, jeopardizing the lucky condition in which our species encountered the world by threatening to make our planet uninhabitable (for us). Even without significant expertise in climate science, one cannot help but be impressed by the accumulated evidence and overwhelming scientific consensus. One has every right to be skeptical about any scientific theory, no matter how well supported, but serious criticism can only be made using the scientific method, proposing an alternate theory with even better evidentiary support. Even approaching climate science from a more skeptical perspective, the principle of precaution would urge us to take immediate steps to avoid even a *potential* harm of such magnitude. Yet, we do nothing—or what amounts to nothing. Increasingly, past predictions of climate scientists come to seem less alarmist, and more conservative— too conservative, as we quicken the process by which the planet becomes inhospitable, and *Homo sapiens* flirts with extinction.

Information, particularly a lack of information, lies at the heart of these problems. These problems are not information "all the way down"—they are more than merely a lack of information, there are resource constraints and psychological biases too. Yet, their solutions *could* all be based fundamentally on information. Voters *could* make immediate action on climate change a prerequisite for holding political office. With fuller information on the global economy, along with proposed reforms, voters *could* make devastating status quo policies taboo and put an end to the career of politicians without a serious reform

proposal. Whether they *would* is another question; perhaps they would find criticisms of the proposed solutions more persuasive, accepting the belief that such proposals would only make things worse. But without mere *knowledge* of the proposals, they cannot do either. Without awareness of options, choice is impossible.

And for war, information is a prophylactic. For as long as Europeans have been known as Europeans, they have slaughtered each other (and non-Europeans) with regularity—only the justifications and weaponry change. Arguably, they have recently become civilized: witness over a half century of relative peace after the unsurpassed barbarity of World War II. And no explanation of *why* Europeans have not relapsed into mass, mutual slaughter could exclude *ideas.* Europeans are better educated than at any time in their history, and it is hard for an educated mind to be duped by rationalizations and justifications for risking one's life while killing unknown others. Today's Europeans disdain aggressive nationalism more than ever and have adopted pacifism to a reassuring extent.[7] The information contained in enough Europeans' minds has prevented the outbreak of that to which Europeans had formerly been as enthusiastically attached as they currently are to football: war.

Manuel González Prada wrote:

> Only a perverse morality can make us regard as bandits six shirtless men who hang about the outskirts of a city and as heroes six thousand uniformed outlaws who invade the neighboring country's territory to steal away lives and property. What is bad in the individual we judge to be good in the collectivity, reducing good and evil to a simple question of numbers. The enormity of a crime or vice transforms it into a praiseworthy action or into virtue. We call the robbery of a million "business" and the garroting of entire nations "a glorious deed." The scaffold for the assassin; apotheosis for the soldier…. When man leaves behind his atavistic ferociousness, war will be remembered as a prehistoric barbarity, and famous and admired warriors of today will figure in the sinister gallery of the devil's children, by the side of assassins, executioners, and butchers. Napoleon's skull will be stacked next to that of a gorilla.[8]

Unhappily, there is still quite a lot of museum space between gorillas and Napoleon. But this is not due to a perverse morality in which small crimes loom large while large crimes are transformed through moral algebra into glorious feats. That is, this flawed morality does not recognize its perversity: it views large crimes as the unfortunate but

only-available means to accomplish great feats. And as the evidence discussed in the second chapter reveals, such a museum placement would be unfair to the gorilla: war is a relatively recent invention, and it is uniquely human. (Or nearly so—we share it in common with ants.)[9]

While early empires like the Roman[10] and Mongol[11] had ideological justifications of some divine sanction granted to the emperor or Khaqan, more recent empires have felt the need to excuse great crimes as the only available way to achieve a greater good.[12] Spain's empire in the Americas was vicious, but its defenders argued that it benefited Indians, civilizing them and saving their souls from eternal torment. Britain's blood-soaked empire was also a noble mission to bring the light of civilization to the barbarians; France eagerly adopted its own *mission civilisatrice*. Nazi Germany was merely trying to save Europe from contamination by inferior genes and Imperial Japan saving Asia from Western imperialism to create a prosperous East, guided by Japan like a wise father. Likewise, the United States merely promotes democracy, freedom, and open commerce. Later empires never seemed to engage in anything other than just, even selfless wars. (As Wyndham Lewis quipped, "what war that was ever fought was an 'unjust' war, except of course that waged by the enemy?")[13]

Why is it that the more recent, post-printing-press empires felt it necessary to present fairly simple power grabs as noble and selfless missions? Why not revel in one's superior power and the maxim that might make right? But no; such thoughts tend to be restricted to "the closed and hushed councils of power, or in the concealed psychological depths of individual men and women."[14]

The definitive reason may never be known, buried in millions of years of evolutionary history interacting with thousands of years of intellectual history and social evolution. But what is important is that for whatever reason—the psychological adaptations that arose to produce large-scale cooperation, and/or institutional and intellectual evolution—naked theft, murder, and exploitation are frowned upon. As Martin Luther King Jr. said, "[i]t seems to be a fact of life that human beings cannot continue to do wrong without eventually reaching out for some thin rationalization to clothe an obvious wrong into beautiful garments of righteousness."[15] But since doing wrong can be *individually* beneficial (or adaptive), this forms a selection pressure for ideas to rationalize and justify predatory behavior; yet in the ecology of the human mind, such rationalizations are always vulnerable to the predation of contrary, critical

ideas. Who today accepts any of these empires' justificatory pronouncements? Who does not cringe when reading an imperialist's rationalizations, like this gem from Winston Churchill:

> I do not agree that the dog in the manger has the final right to the manger, even though he may have lain there for a very long time. I do not admit that right. I do not admit, for instance, that a great wrong has been done to the Red Indians of America, or the black people of Australia. I do not admit that a wrong has been done to these people by the fact that a stronger race, a higher grade race, a more worldly-wise race, to put it that way, has come in and taken their place.[16]

All but one of these empires fell apart, for a variety of reasons. But one is surely that the ideas undergirding those empires failed to gain and retain the consent of sufficient people—among the rulers or the ruled. As Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach put it: "but little evil would be done in the world if evil never could be done in the name of good."[17] Perhaps our increasingly interconnected societies are inching toward such a state where evil-in-the-name-of-good becomes too difficult to sell.

Hence the promise of a well-functioning media and the marketplace of ideas supports and maintains: through open intellectual competition, harmful ideas stand little chance of surviving for long. Few could disagree with John Stuart Mill that "[i]t is a piece of idle sentimentality that truth, merely as truth, has any inherent power denied to error,"[18] but one can hope that there is an ever-present selection pressure in the ecology of the human mind for ideas conducive to a better life for humankind. This is a hope, and fundamentally a guess—albeit, an educated one.[19] A desire to avoid human suffering and promote human happiness is not the *only* selection pressure, guaranteeing with the passage of sufficient time a beneficial outcome. Yet it is deep-seated, arising from the suite of adaptations that first created our species. If Antonio Gramsci could write about having pessimism of the intellect, but *optimism of the will* while dying in Mussolini's prisons, those reading this can afford to be hopeful too.

However, there is ample reason for the intellect's pessimism. The following chapters provide additional reasons, at least for any who comfort themselves with soothing ideas about how the media and democracy currently work. Yet even arch-pessimist Harold Bloom ends *The Lucifer Principle*, his iconoclastic romp through the cruelty and misery of human history, with a similar hope:

We must invent a way in which memes and their superorganismic carriers—nations and subcultures—can compete without carnage. We may find a clue to that path in science. A scientific system is one in which small groups of men and women cohere around an idea, then use the powers of persuasion and politics to establish that idea's dominance in their field, and to drive rival hypotheses – along with those who propound them – to the periphery.[20]

This is the promise of a *functioning*, free-marketplace of ideas. Such a possibility looks distant, but as this book will demonstrate, the evidence inclining us toward hope outweighs that tending toward despair. That is, *if* we keep in sight the timescale appropriate to social evolution.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was a Catholic priest, scientist, and theologian who crossed evolutionary theory—down (or up) to the ideational, cultural level—with Catholic theology.[21] He knew that whether we think of the future as pessimists or optimists, we intuitively consider only a time period corresponding to our lifetimes (or a year, or the next quarter). As such, the pessimists seem to have the upper hand. But Chardin pointed out that the better way to decide whether to be optimistic or pessimistic is to adopt a timeframe appropriate to social evolution:

[H]alf a million years, perhaps even a million, were required for life to pass from the pre-hominids to modern man. Should we now start wringing our hands because, less than two centuries after glimpsing a higher state, modern man is still at loggerheads with himself? Once again we have got things out of focus. To have understood the immensity around us, behind us, and in front of us is already a first step. But if to this perception of depth another perception, that of *slowness*, be not added, we must realize that the transposition of values remains incomplete and that it can beget for our gaze nothing but an impossible world. Each dimension has its proper rhythm. Planetary movement involves planetary majesty. Would not humanity seem to us altogether static, if, behind its history, there were not the endless stretch of its pre-history? Similarly … we cannot expect to see the earth transform itself under our eyes in the space of a generation. Let us keep calm and take heart.[22]

While keeping calm and taking heart is as good advice as having optimism of the will, the question is whether the "omega point" de Chardin described—a convergence with the Divine to which human evolution is purportedly directed—will come in the life, or death, of *Homo sapiens*.

Will our species take advantage of our exponentially increased ability to communicate and inform, or go extinct? In the absence of a benevolent dictator to guide us, our only chance is a free marketplace of ideas, a functioning public sphere. Let us hope we have time enough to create one.

NOTES

1. Some of these have been preserved in: Martha Cooper, *Remembering 9/11* (Brooklyn: Mark Batty Publisher, 2011).
2. Gore Vidal, *United States: Essays: 1952–1992* (New York: Broadway Books, 2001): 510, emphasis added.
3. Stephan Lewandowsky et al., "Misinformation, Disinformation, and Violent Conflict: From Iraq and the 'War on Terror' to Future Threats to Peace," *American Psychologist* 68, no. 7 (2013): 489.
4. Due either to the poverty of the English language itself or my impoverished ability to use it with unfailing accuracy, much of the discussion in this book will use words that imply intentionality to describe mindless processes, or aggregate outcomes of many conscious (and unconscious) choices none of which individually *intended* to produce the aggregate outcome. For instance, evolutionary "selection"—clearly, there is no actor, Nature, that consciously *selects* some traits or populations for survival and others for extinction. This is a problem that may lead to misinterpretation, as when Richard Dawkins' use of the word "selfish" to describe how mindless bits of DNA replicate led many readers to erroneously infer that our genes evolved to produce selfish individual organisms. Nowhere in this book, however, is language that often *implies* intentionality actually *meant* to suggest that conscious intent is in any way involved outside of human consciousness. On a less important note, I most commonly use the Latin loan word "media" in the singular, although in its original Latin it is plural. "The media" is meant to refer to the modern means of mass communication and the institutions that wield them: newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and the internet.
5. Shawn W. Rosenberg, "Against Neoclassical Political Economy: A Political Psychological Critique." *Political Psychology* (1995): 99–136; However, see also Olivia Newman, *Liberalism in Practice: The Psychology and Pedagogy of Public Reason* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015).
6. Larry M. Bartels, "Uninformed Votes: Information Effects in Presidential Elections," *American Journal of Political Science* (1996): 194.
7. Raphael S. Cohen and Gabriel M. Scheinmann, "Can Europe Fill the Void in US Military Leadership?" *Orbis* 58, no. 1 (2015); James Sheehan, *The Monopoly of Violence: Why Europeans Hate Going to War* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008).

8. Manuel González Prada, "Priests, Indians, Soldiers, and Heroes," in *The Peru Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, ed. Orin Starn et al., 199–206 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995): 201–202.

9. Mark W. Moffett, "Ants & the Art of War," *Scientific American* 305, no. 6 (2011).

10. Clifford Ando, *Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty in the Roman Empire*, Vol. 6 (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000): 19–48.

11. Michal Biran, "The Mongol Transformation: From the Steppe to Eurasian Empire," *Medieval Encounters* 10, no. 1–3 (2004): 340–341.

12. See, for instance, Anthony Pagden, *Lords of All the World: Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain and France c. 1500-c. 1800* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995).

13. Wyndham Lewis, *Rude Assignment: An Intellectual Autobiography*, ed. Toby Foshay (Berkeley, CA: Gingko Press, 1984): 45.

14. Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999): 87.

15. Martin Luther King Jr., "The Church on the Frontier of Racial Tension," mimeographed transcript taken from taped recording of address given by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., as the James B. Gay Lectures (April 19, 1961): 2.

16. Quoted in Arundhati Roy, *War Talk* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2003): 58.

17. Kuno Francke and Isidore Singer, eds, *The German Classics: Masterpieces of German Literature Translated into English*, Vol. 8 (New York: The German Publication Society, 1914): 435.

18. John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1865): 17.

19. For example, Hugo Mercier and Daniel Sperber, "Why Do Humans Reason? Arguments for an Argumentative Theory," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 34, no. 2 (2011).

20. Howard K. Bloom, *The Lucifer Principle: A Scientific Expedition into the Forces of History* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1997): 328–329.

21. See, for orthodox criticism, Scott Ventureyra, "Challenging the Rehabilitation of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin," *Crisis Magazine* (January 20, 2015).

22. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959): 254–255.

Conclusion: The Invisible Hand and the Ecology of Information

"The people in the sense in which Lincoln used the term, as referring to the electorate, is an organized body, but it is not of as high a type as a beast, for a beast, even though vaguely, has a consciousness of its unity, its selfhood. The people, the organized body of the citizenship has a unity, a selfhood, but it is no more conscious of it than are the coördinated cells of a cabbage leaf of their unity. The people is not a great beast. The people is a great vegetable."
Edward J. Ward, *The Social Center*

In Robert Dahl's conjecture, the key requirement for a plebiscitary democracy to be functionally equivalent to totalitarian rule was elites' ability to "plug in," hypodermic-needle fashion, desired opinions into the minds of the electorate. We can now review the evidence on whether this plugging-in ability exists, or in what form it might.

We started out asking how the invisible hand operates in the contemporary marketplace of ideas, dependent on the crooked timber of human psychology and the broken fourth branch of government, the media. The accumulated evidence recalls Shiping Tang's statement that "any framework on social evolution that does not explicitly admit power as a critical selection force is incomplete."[1] Yorgos Lanthimos' film *Dogtooth*, an allegory on fascism, patriarchy, and paternalism, provides an illustration. In the film, three grown-yet-infantile children are kept inside the boundaries of their hedge-fenced yard by their parents, who cow them into immobilizing fear with lies about the dangers of the outside world. These lies are not "white" or superficial, they are foundational: they

are memes that *create* the world outside which the children will never experience. ("Sea," which the children will never see, is defined as a "leather armchair"; one of the daughters sees the word "pussy" on a videocassette case, and her mother tells her it means a "large lamp.") They are told they can leave their home only when one of their canine teeth, a "dogtooth," falls out, signifying the onset of maturity required to survive in the outside world. Toward the end of the film, the male child is commanded to rape one of his sisters, and he does; anticipating future rapes, she later smashes out one of her dogteeth with a dumbbell to attempt an escape. As Voltaire wrote: "You believe in incomprehensible, contradictory and impossible things because we have commanded you to; now then, commit unjust acts because we likewise order you to do so."[2]

To a circumscribed but still discomforting extent, the U.S. media system echoes the parents of *Dogtooth*, with the citizenry as their adult but infantilized children, whose pictures-in-the-head of the outside world are distorted, limited, and artificial. Power operating in the realm of social evolution produces these artifices, limitations, and distortions. Not the *intentional* exercise of power as in *Dogtooth*, but the unintentional, multifarious varieties of power comprising the political economy of media in interaction with the ecology of human psychology. Through the news media, the U.S. public is told that their form of government, which their government's military exploits are supposed to encourage globally, is "democracy" and that its military and covert operations are to ensure "security" and protect the "national interest." Indeed, those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities.

The beginning of an understanding of this process lies in recognizing the physical nature of information and how it evolves. Information, in genes or brains, inheres in the organization of physical matter. Sources of variation (mutation, recombination; ideation, idea-blending) introduce new variants, which are computed by the surrounding environment: variants that survive longer and spread more widely are "selected," incrementally ratcheting up the complexity or "fit" of the information to aspects of the environment. In the realm of social evolution, there are three interpenetrating levels: the biological, the cultural, and the social, each with their own selection pressures. At the biological and cultural levels, schema research shows that we process incoming information to complement our existing information, sometimes distorting it in the process, making for a bias toward the status quo and the conservation of beliefs. At the social level, social representations research illustrates how

socially-shared understandings—similar bundles of memes—emerge and spread, principally through the media but also through other institutions, and how these understandings affect politics. To understand social evolution, we must understand the environment: the demand-side pressures in the human brain and supply-side pressures from institutions.

The first place to look for demand-side pressures in the human brain is in its evolutionary history. Our species was partially created through climate change (and, ironically, we may destroy the species through anthropogenic climate change), which transformed our environment and created a new set of selection pressures. We adapted in an unusual way: by evolving a "theory of mind," joint intentionality, and language, overcoming the ever-present lure of self-interested, selfish behavior through a powerful psychological aversion to domination—an "egalitarian syndrome"—undergirding and reinforcing social norms and practices to discourage or eliminate bullies and would-be alphas. We became the first non-insect *eusocial* species in the animal kingdom. In the process, an evolutionarily stable strategy or equilibrium was reached, with some of the population having characteristics of the psychological Right (a desire for tradition and continuity, an acceptance of hierarchy) and some with characteristics of the psychological Left (a desire for change and novelty, for egalitarianism). Together, this "strategy" would allow for the evolutionary algorithm to apply at the social level, with the Left introducing variations and the Right preserving past variations. Differences in the *psychological* Left and Right extend to morality, with leftists valuing care and fairness more than rightists, and rightists valuing respect for authority, sanctity, and loyalty more than leftists. In total, these products of our evolutionary history produce a separate set of demand-side biases for the psychological Left and Right.

Liberalism as a (predominant) political philosophy views human beings as innate reasoners capable of meeting a relatively high standard of rationality in thinking about politics. Yet the accumulated evidence of human irrationality in the political domain overwhelms this view, revealing:

- Automatic, unconscious moral decisions justified by *ad hoc* rationalizations, a vast area of cognition (System 1) to which we have no conscious access, and *persuasion* that occurs through unconscious, System 1 processing;
- A mental architecture favoring cognitive consistency and low anxiety over accuracy and moral principle;

- Groupishness aroused by the most arbitrary and meaningless group distinctions, biasing us in favor of our in-group and against out-groups;
- We demonstrate ideological biases in memory, gullibly accept incoming information, and fail to revise discredited beliefs;
- We exhibit a tendency to justify and desire the status quo, regardless of its flaws, and to ignore dire problems in proportion to their urgency and complexity;
- Weak arguments do not weakly persuade, but rather inoculate us against accepting a strong version of the same argument, making weak balance in the media more manipulative than no balance at all;
- The myriad ways in which evil actions can be rationalized, removed from their context, or ignored, particularly in the case of war;
- The "interpreter" mechanism in our minds that produces self-deception by bringing only flattering information and motives into conscious awareness, while leaving ulterior motives and unflattering information in the dark;
- Stark differences in cognitive development, with a small minority developing a systematic style of thought analogous to the liberal ideal, while a majority develop only a linear or sequential style incapable of the complex reasoning democracy requires.

Media systems must therefore be calibrated to counteract or mute our demand-side, psychological biases; otherwise, even a fair and balanced media can produce irrational effects on public opinion, owing to our suboptimal psychology. A psychologically appropriate media system would be pluralist and open, favoring a diversity of perspectives and speakers, and seeking to frustrate distortions like in-group bias and system justification.

Psychological biases would be of little concern to a media system that produces minimal effects. This is not the case: the media produces large effects, which only seem minimal when opposing messages largely cancel each other out. Not only political messages, but also advertising and cultural programming affect opinions and influence socialization. The cognitive conservatism of our brains' design makes snowballing effects likelier than deep revisions of previously held beliefs, giving an absorption-advantage to information consonant with dominant social representations. Whether through priming, framing, agenda-setting, or direct persuasion, decades of research have revealed the media to be a

powerful force in shaping public opinion. Hence, to a large extent elites do have the *ability* to plug in their preferences through the media to get what they want out of the system, though the metaphor of a plug suggests a degree of ease that is somewhat lacking. The "socket" is a moving target, and not always yielding.

The plug—the media system itself—has been recognized as a powerful force throughout its history and treated as such by governments for most of it. Yet at a pivotal juncture—the development of radio and then television—the United States government made the fateful decision to turn the broadcast media over to commercial enterprises, which used it for the narrow goal of fat profits. This is the first of several biases skewing media content: toward the perceived desires of women and young adults, including sensationalism, a liberal take on social issues, and more lifestyle or sports coverage. Journalists themselves tend to be left-of-center on social issues, and centrist or right-of-center on economic issues, and there is evidence of renewed ownership pressure on journalists to avoid coverage damaging to their parent companies' or advertisers' interests. Additional filters influence what information appears in the mass media: the code of journalistic professionalism removing context from stories in a quixotic quest for objectivity, source bias and indexing privileging the powerful, pack journalism and social influences from those whom journalists cover, advertiser pressure and flak, and even direct influence from the government. The cumulative result is that the media system "plug" gives preference to perspectives and interests of the economic and political elite, echoing the status quo-supporting biases of human psychology. Biases of both demand and supply skew toward the status quo, slowing social evolution by reducing sources of novelty and variation. The inputs "plugged in" to the system do not produce perfectly predictable outputs, but the media system allows certain inputs to be blocked, thereby impeding certain outputs. The answer to Dahl's conjecture seems to be that if the plebiscitary democracy of the United States is not strictly the functional equivalent of totalitarian rule, it is a worryingly close approximation.

Looking around the world at other media systems, the struggle to avoid the pap of commercialism and the propaganda of government control is universal. The media systems closest to approximating the democratic ideal are those of northern Europe, the Democratic Corporatist model. These retain a strong, well-funded public service media that does a far better job than commercial media of informing the electorate (and

even influences commercial media in a positive direction, along with content regulations). In the presence of legal mechanisms to weaken government influence over public media, government-funded public service media is a force tending toward a more knowledgeable (and more *equally* knowledgeable) citizenry, one better able to identify its various interests and match them to political policies. The accumulated evidence makes unavoidable the conclusion that the U.S. media system (along with others) is an impediment to a system of government in which all people exercise equal political power.

Which political memes are prevalent among the U.S. electorate? That is, what information do voters get delivered to them by the predominant provider of information logistics, the media? An observer is likely to first notice that they are few in number. The electorate may not be stupid, but it is unarguably ignorant—and ignorant of the extent of its ignorance. For an observer aware of the breadth of the *global* political spectrum and the variety of ideologies around the world, the second most likely observation is that the Right and Left in the United States are surprisingly similar. Disagreements on social and religious issues run deep, but some of the most central issues of politics—how to produce and distribute goods and services, and interact with the rest of the world—are only fleetingly debated, as would be expected of a population ignorant of the variety of perspectives. So what does it mean for the voters to *decide* on economic or foreign policy, for instance, or to choose representatives to carry out their will? To ask the question is to answer it.

Nonetheless, the evidence does not allow for a strict deterministic reading: inputs do not *determine* outputs. Input from the media determines what information will be widely held, but not how that information will be processed and acted on. Conceptual blending can produce kaleidoscopic effects: a character or storyline from a movie or novel can blend with the anemic information provided by the media to create radically divergent ideas about a politician or political policy. For instance, the characters in *House of Cards* or *In the Loop* can blend with mere horserace coverage of politics to create a deeply cynical attitude toward politicians, even if they are generally presented positively in the media (creating arguably more-accurate knowledge even in the absence of much relevant information). Yet despite the important distinction between *determining* and *influencing*, it does little to reduce the democratic deficit. Leaving the formation of an accurately informed citizenry up to their own creativity is a crapshoot, with as great a likelihood of

success as tossing paint against a canvas and hoping to create a painting to rival Jackson Pollock's.

1   Social Evolution: Observations for Epistemology

"Nothing is so passionate as a vested interest disguised as an intellectual conviction."
—Sean O'Casey, "The White Plague"

The meme's eye view, or the perspective of social evolution, is cause for a great deal of epistemic skepticism. It points out the arbitrariness and contingency of our beliefs, as being the result of memes which happened to reproduce themselves in our brains. It forces the uncomfortable recognition that each of us would have entirely different beliefs had we merely inhabited a different environment (as Montaigne would say, on the other side of a mountain). It demands that we engage in foundationally critical thinking; in light of our suboptimal rationality and the contingency of our beliefs, we must make constant good-faith attempts to debunk our own beliefs. That is, we must apply a falsificationist strategy against our beliefs, actively seeking out evidence that may undermine them—in effect, consciously swimming against the stream of our evolved psychology, which seeks to confirm our own beliefs.

There is no avoiding that even the most well-read among us are radically ignorant and that the realm of unknown unknowns dwarfs that of what we know and even what we know we do not know. Since our brains evolved to exhibit cognitive conservatism, treating our beliefs like prized possessions we are loathe to give up or replace, we must realize that our feeling of confidence in our beliefs is a universal illusion and only rarely well-founded. And as Macaulay might have argued, whose opinion is to decide which beliefs are well-founded, and whose confidence in their beliefs is a deception? This epistemic quandary would be bad enough even if our brains were bias-free blank slates from birth; it is made worse in light of our evolved political predispositions, our Left or Right psychology, our elective affinities for ideas promising equality and change or hierarchy and tradition.

Our ideas about any political issue are inherently contestable: a definitive answer to any of them is vanishingly unlikely, if only because social evolution is rarely in stasis. A definitive, correct answer at one moment is likely to be incorrect at the next moment in direct proportion to the change

occurring in the interim. Adjudicating even the simplest political question is prey to radical ignorance, different sets of information held by opposing sides, the incommensurability of even the same (disembodied) information stored in different brains with emotional memories tied to it, and our evolved political predispositions. Every political argument shares in common the fate of every *legal* argument: "but the other side can argue that…" As in law, so in politics: the argument that carries the day is not necessarily the best-supported, but the one favored by the relevant authority, whether a judge or jury, the majority of voters or the government. And as Jonathan Swift wrote, lawyers "take special Care to record all the Decisions formerly made against common Justice and the general Reason of Mankind. These, under the name of *Precedents*, they produce as Authorities to justify the most iniquitous Opinions; and the Judges never fail of decreeing accordingly."[3] Likewise, the dead hand of political history produces its own sort of iniquitous precedents, the basic beliefs, and self-serving historical myths into which we are socialized. In the face of this, a retreat into radical relativism or epistemological skepticism, even cynicism, is understandable.

Yet an absolute epistemological skepticism is unwarranted. Just as the process of motivated reasoning is impeded by so-called knowledge constraints (we cannot completely ignore contrary evidence, and at critical mass it forces us to revise our beliefs), so too our political beliefs encounter reality constraints. We can no sooner believe that submission to the directives of an intergalactic empire is the best political-economic system than we can believe that the moon is made of Brie. Still, this is little comfort; the reality that can constrain our beliefs is too distant and immense to have any ideas *about* other than spooks. However, even with its distance and immensity, over time reality has asserted itself against our more fanciful political ideas, from the divine right of kings to the inferiority of certain "races" as created by God or nature. History is a graveyard of our more egregious spooks.

The epistemology suggested by the evolution of ideas can offer little guidance as to choosing accurate beliefs. But the banal, law student observation that "a different argument could be made" warrants only a tired nod of assent; it does not warrant radical relativism or all-encompassing epistemological skepticism. The question is not *whether* an argument could be made—of course, one *could* be made, an infinite number of different arguments can *always* be made—but whether an argument is better supported than any contrary argument. Of course, there are no judges on intellectual Mount Olympus who can observe the totality of

relevant evidentiary support and unerringly rule in favor of the best-supported argument. We have only radically ignorant human judges. Yet in spite of our unavoidably, immutably radical ignorance, our brains were "designed" to argue: millions of years of evolution have produced a species of innate lawyers, capable not only of crafting arguments using the information one has, but also of choosing the most accurate and beneficial understandings of reality—again, given the information one has. Since our radical ignorance precludes us from choosing only the wisest and best among us to decide political questions, we are left with government by public opinion. Our only hope of making public opinion into a fine governor is to inform it. And since we know that we cannot be certain in the veracity of our own political beliefs, to *inform* public opinion can only mean to expose it to a diversity of political beliefs.

Even so, this provides little guidance; it is merely saying that we are dexterous enough to pick them up after we "let the cards fall where they may"—only it is requiring that we use a full deck. But the evidence of demand-side, psychological biases provides something more. It cannot suggest which ideas are more likely to be true, but it does suggest which ideas are *less* likely to be true. Absent some mystical principle by which our evolved psychological biases actually incline us toward Truth (a wildly contradictory Truth—truths which are true only on one side of a mountain, and false on the other), we can confidently use them to determine which of our ideas deserve greater *skepticism* than others. As in constitutional jurisprudence, where different laws are given varying levels of scrutiny according to the interest of the state and their risk of encroaching upon fundamental rights, we can use our knowledge of psychological biases as a guide to determine our level of skepticism toward certain ideas. Exposing the pedigree of an idea may undercut some—the pedigree of the "race" meme being the most obvious example—but exposing the psychological bias *supportive* of an idea is more widely applicable. Once our skepticism has been heightened with regard to an idea, we should expend greater effort in attempting to refute it, or in finding and considering someone else's refutation.

All psychological biases are irrational, compared to a liberal ideal, but some can be socially beneficial. We have biases toward equality and change or hierarchy and tradition, and while these are irrational to the extent that they derive from genetic endowments rather than analysis of evidence, they may be beneficial. In fact, these biases may be the cornerstone of social evolution: Left psychology provides a source of novel

variation, and Right psychology provides longevity for the variants of the past. Nonetheless, we are likely to adopt and adhere to some ideas, to some extent, due to our psychological Left and Right biases. We would do well to submit ideas favored by our Left or Right psychology to greater scrutiny.

Other psychological biases are both irrational and harmful. In-group bias, while evolutionarily important in the abstract for its role in facilitating cooperation, is rationally indefensible in the majority of its manifestations. Being born in Borneo, Taiwan, or on a space station are all irrelevant—just as irrelevant as the color of one's eyes, skin, hair, or clothes—to a determination of individual or group worth. The fact that in-group bias makes us likely to treat such irrelevant, arbitrary distinctions as important in determining political questions must give us pause: it is a rational error despite its evolutionary pedigree. *Is* does not imply *ought*. Rather, it demands suspicion: we must apply strict scrutiny to ideas that make our in-group, whether national, partisan, ideological, ethnic, or any other sort, seem praiseworthy. *Ceteris paribus*, we are more likely to adopt an idea if it paints our in-group in a pleasing light; hence, all ideas we are exposed to which make us feel good about our in-group deserve suspicion. And *only* suspicion: in-group bias is only one force among many influencing our adoption of ideas, and there are plenty of true ideas that also make our in-groups look good. The United States was an inspiration for democrats the world over, despite its historical failure to live up to the ideal; Britain outlawed the practice of widow-burning in India, despite causing untold misery there and throughout its empire; and the Japanese empire freed millions from European colonialism, despite yoking them under its own domination.

The system justification tendency is another irrational bias demanding the application of strict scrutiny. (System justification itself could be conceived as the application of strict scrutiny to proposals for system *change*, thereby irrationally favoring the status quo.) Ideas with a Panglossian air, those that support whatever status quo one happens to be living in, deserve more suspicion then ideas critical of it. *Ceteris paribus*, ideas supportive of one's government or political and economic system have an (irrational) advantage over critical ideas; apologetics are stickier than critiques. Hence, we should apply extra scrutiny to defenses of the status quo (and only scrutiny: an irrational *inclination* does not imply the absence of any rational reasons).

Studies of gene-culture coevolution have uncovered a "prestige bias" tending to push us into irrationally adopting ideas simply because they are held by those with wealth or high status. As with in-group bias, this has a clear evolutionary rationale: adopting ideas from highly-regarded fellow tribe members likely was an adaptive strategy for most of human history. Someone able to win the approbation of aggressive egalitarians likely had some useful ideas about food, predators, or social life. After the Lucky Sperm Club arose along with sedentary mass societies, however, high status from wealth went to a much broader class of people, whose ideas are just as likely to be beneficial as harmful, brilliant as moronic. (Think of the political ideas of Henry Ford or Kim Kardashian.) *Ceteris paribus*, the spooks of the rich are no better than the spooks of the poor or middle-class—yet we are more likely to adopt them under the influence of prestige bias (not to mention supply-side biases). Ideas favored by those with wealth or high status therefore deserve stricter scrutiny.

These sorts of irrational psychological biases are important for epistemology, the study of knowledge, and may also help explain its opposite: "agnotology," or the study of ignorance.[4] While awareness of psychological biases can help *improve* epistemic practices in politics, they (along with supply-side biases) *explain* much about agnotology. The cigarette industry sowing doubt about the link between tobacco and cancer is primarily an example of a supply-side bias: tobacco companies funding and disseminating research meant to persuade people that cigarettes might *not* be harmful. It also involved demand-side bias: smokers were more likely to accept manufactured doubt about the danger of the drug they used (through cognitive dissonance reduction, confirmation bias, and the pull of addiction). Both forms of bias produced widespread ignorance of the very real link between cancer and cigarettes.

Another example is that of climate change.[5] Military-funded research in the 1940s predicted dangerous global warming, but military secrecy kept these findings from being publicly disseminated (a supply-side bias).[6] As other scientists and institutions began to openly publish similar findings, demand-side biases (cognitive consistency, system justification) entered the picture: believers in free-market ideology opposed the science because it suggested government intervention into the economy to solve a dire problem caused by the free market itself. This then fed back into a supply-side bias, as free-market fundamentalists took a page from Big Tobacco's playbook and began funding and disseminating research meant to cast doubt on climate change.

Of course, ignorance is rife in the political realm, which Jeffrey Friedman describes as "a cacophony of confident voices that unwittingly express factual ignorance, theoretical ignorance, ignorance of logic, ignorance of their own possible ignorance, ignorance of their opponents' possible ignorance; and, in consequence, dogmatism, demagoguery, and demonization."[7] But the ignorance of agnotology is of a yet another sort, suggesting partially-hidden or submerged knowledge on the demand side—a result of self-deception—and conscious attempts to spread ignorance (or doubt) on the supply side (facilitated by other psychological biases, like in-group bias).[8] Charles Mills has explored agnotology in liberal political philosophy, demonstrating how classical liberals displayed a shocking degree of ignorance about how their purportedly universal philosophy was in practice applied only to Whites.[9] He has identified the key variable of political epistemology and agnotology as *power*:

> [T]he conceptual array with which the cognizer approaches the world needs itself to be scrutinized for its adequacy to the world, for how well it maps the reality it claims to be describing. If the society is one structured by relations of domination and subordination (as of course most societies in recent human history have been), then in certain areas this conceptual apparatus is likely going to be shaped in various ways by the biases of the ruling groups.[10]

Indeed, economic and political power is the preponderant influence in the ecology of information. It brings with it its own demand biases, which readily enter supply as well. Perhaps Mark Twain should have written instead that whenever you find yourself on the side of the *powerful*, it is time to pause and reflect.

2   POWER

"There is something about power that distorts judgments more or less. The chances that a powerful person will make an error are much greater than those of a weak person. Power has recourse to its own resources. Weakness must draw on reason. All other things being equal, it is always true that those who govern have opinions which are less just, less sane, less impartial than those whom they govern."
—Benjamin Constant, *Principles of Politics Applicable to All Governments*

In a free, commercial media system whose output mimics that of a government-controlled propaganda system, evil outcomes are not the

result of evil intentions. They are the result of an invisible hand: the aggregate forces, pressures, and tendencies in a certain type of human ecology, whether the business world, the foreign policy establishment, or the media system. Adam Smith's "unseen hand" referred both to the force of self-interest and the force of morality, which Smith conceptualized as the desire to conform to the judgments of others in the society.[11] Smith wrote during a time when corporations were banned in England (in reaction to the Enron of the day, the South Sea Company's collapse); he recognized that the professional managers of corporations would not run their businesses in the way a baker or butcher (or partnership) would—they would lack the pressure of moral conformity.[12] Just as psychopaths do not intuitively *feel* our evolved sense of morality that produces conformity to social norms, psychopathic institutions lack structural features that might impose conformity to social morality. Institutions *with* such features would obviate any worry about psychopathic individuals within them: their individual (immoral) intentions would matter less once constrained by countervailing institutional pressure. This pressure would ensure that to do well, one would have to do good—regardless of motives and intentions. Defending Marcus Aurelius against the charge of narcissism, "that all his life he was just, laborious, beneficent out of vanity, and that his virtues served only to dupe mankind," Voltaire wrote: "Dear god, give us often such rascals!"[13]

But even in the face of morally appropriate institutional design, power remains a force capable of skewing the ecology of information and producing immoral outcomes. Power often is the creation of institutions: it is what control of an institution grants an individual. As such, it is both a supply-side bias (the institution and its effects once wielded) and a demand-side bias, since it affects our psychology in profound ways. The science fiction writer Douglas Adams observed: "It is difficult to be sat on all day, every day, by some other creature, without forming an opinion about them. … On the other hand, it is perfectly possible to sit all day, every day, on top of another creature and not have the slightest thought about them whatsoever."[14] This is supported by psychological research: power reduces our ability to understand how others see the world, adopt others' perspectives, take into account others' knowledge or lack thereof, and intuit others' emotions.[15]

Like all psychological biases, that produced by power is invisible, subconscious. Max Weber was correct "that in every such situation he who is more favored feels the never ceasing need to look upon his position

as in some way 'legitimate,' upon his advantage as 'deserved,' and the other's disadvantage as being brought about by the latter's 'fault.' That the purely accidental causes of the difference may be ever so obvious makes no difference."[16] Psychological bias is immune to the obvious.

If power is defined as the ability to exercise one's will, then in market societies where most everything one desires may be purchased, wealth is a rather direct proxy for power. Unsurprisingly, the psychological effects of wealth mimic those of power: wealth reduces our ability to empathize with others,[17] leading to a style of moral judgments[18] similar to that of psychopaths.[19] It makes us feel more entitled and leads to greater narcissism.[20] A study of lottery winners found that a sudden windfall of money made them less egalitarian and more supportive of right-wing political parties, in direct proportion to the amount of money won.[21]

Little wonder then, given the demand-side bias of wealth and power, that the wealthiest 1% in the USA has starkly different political beliefs than those of the 99%. They are more concerned about government deficits, more favorable to cutting taxes and social welfare programs (health care, the earned income tax credit, social security, minimum wage, government jobs programs, education), less favorable to increasing government regulation of corporations and redistributing wealth or income, and less concerned with inequality.[22] And in the U.S. political system, the wealthy mostly get what they want, while the government is non-responsive to the desires of the non-wealthy.[23] Evidence shows that elected officials do not even bother learning what the electorate wants.[24] Why should they: wealth can buy elections *to* Congress,[25] and votes *in* Congress.[26] Insufficient money is ever so much a bar to holding public office in the United States as the "wrong" ideology is in Iran or China.[27]

Private power is not *greater* than public power so much as it *constitutes* public power; government is a Leviathan to the people, a tool for the wealthy.[28] The demand-side bias produced by power fashions the link between class interest and ideology, and the disproportionate influence the wealthy exert over the media, political, and education systems creates supply-side biases influencing elections. Of course, the electorate has *proximate* power over the government through the vote. But the voters are the owners of the country in the same sense that shareholders are the owners of a corporation whose CEO presents them with annual reports giving them misleading or fraudulent information. Voters are the proximate owners; the ultimate owners are those who control the

supply of information voters can easily, cheaply access. And policy-relevant information is cheaper for businesses to obtain, since voters must pay in time and money for it, while businesses acquire it in the daily course of operations.[29] Information drives a wide gap between proximate and ultimate control, explaining why the government does not serve the "median voter" but only those investment blocs that can afford the exorbitant costs of campaigning; without money, reason, discussion, and persuasion avail one nothing.[30] "The electorate is not too stupid or too tired to control the political system. It is merely too poor."[31] Delving into the byzantine array of recent campaign finance records, Tom Ferguson concludes: "What both major investors and candidates have long known intuitively—that a relatively small number of giant sources provide most of the funding for successful major party candidates—is true. The relatively thin stream of small contributions simply does not suffice to float (conventionally managed) national campaigns, and all insiders know it."[32]

The power of wealth exerts its pull in politics and the media, and also in the academy. Supply-side biases enter through grants from foundations and institutes named after their philanthropist founders (and funders), resulting in the production of analyses that seem less like political *science* and more like apologetics for the status quo.[33] In international relations scholarship, power pulls more directly.[34]

Of course, poverty does not grant wisdom, and wealth does not guarantee a distorted ideology. Malevolent motives or character do not need to be imputed; again, the ecology of our minds (psychology) interacting with the ecology of information (media, schools) produces its effects with or without human intentionality. Hence, not only are we more likely to adopt ideas of the powerful due to "prestige bias" operating within our psychology; we are also more likely to adopt the ideas of the powerful due to their influence over supply. *Ceteris paribus*, ideas favored and promoted by the powerful must be given stricter scrutiny.

3   Economics

"¡La economía es de gente, no de curvas!"—"Economics is about people, not curves!"
—Graffiti on a Madrid campus

To create a distinction between good ("supporting" of the ideals it purports to embody) and bad ("undermining" of the ideals it purports to

embody) propaganda, the philosopher Jason Stanley took a step back to acknowledge that judgments about propaganda are unavoidably ideological: "If a neutral stance means a stance without ideological belief, then the neutral stance is a myth."[35] We all have ideological beliefs, spooks:

> The fact that there is no neutral stance cannot lead us to political paralysis, or to skepticism about political and moral reality. It is an error to try to evade the facts of our epistemic limitations by adopting metaphysical anti-realism. We must come to terms with the fact of our limited perspective while occupying that very perspective. There is simply no other way.[36]

So too this book must perforce occupy an ideological perspective. There is no objective perspective possible—only the objectivity of idiots (in the classical Greek sense of one who is removed from public affairs).

To some readers, this entire argument is a tempest in a teapot. "Sure," they might say, "there are problems with our media systems, and they might not be ideal – but what tragedy have they caused?" It is for this reason that the majority of media critics occupy a position to the right or left of the ideological spectrum in the media system.

We have already seen how media reports on economic issues hew closely to economic orthodoxy, particularly to the views of financial market participants and central bankers. This would be less of a problem if economic orthodoxy were like dominant paradigms in the natural sciences. But as Robert Sidelsky explains, economics is different: "much more so than in physics, the research agenda and structure of power within the profession reflect the structure of power outside it. They have the character of ideologies."[37] Holders of economic power have no interest in shaping physics or chemistry, but the science of the source of their power is another matter.[38] This reflection of the power outside economics forces us to ask:

> Who finances the institutions from which ideas spring? Who finances the dissemination of ideas in popular form – media, think tanks? What are the incentives facing the producers, disseminators, and popularisers of ideas even in a society in which discussion is 'free'? In short, what is the agenda of business? It is reasonable to see business as the hard power behind the soft power of ideas, not because the business community speaks with one voice, or because there are not other centres of hard power

(e.g. government) but because it is the main source of the money without which the intellectual estate would wither and die.[39]

This hard selection pressure (among others) has shaped economics since its inception. Robert Babe observes: "At every stage of its evolution, mainstream economics has been aligned with, and has doctrinally served, a class interest."[40] Or, when the interests of businesses in a country were sufficiently uniform, national interest would subsume class interest as the master of economics. For example, Sophus Reinert traces a forgotten British protectionist treatise through time and translations into several European languages from an explicitly evolutionary perspective.[41] First published in 1695, John Cary's *Essay on the State of England* argued for the encouragement of high value-added domestic manufacturing by imposing tariffs on foreign goods and restrictions on exports of raw materials; while this could increase prices of manufactured goods, it was compensated by an increase in wages.[42] Once implemented, this policy served England well, turning it into a manufacturing powerhouse. Yet England refused to preach what it practiced; instead, the British government kicked away the ladder, promoting the idea that only free trade and open markets brought wealth.[43]

By the nineteenth century, "'free trade' simply meant England's freedom to export manufactured goods in exchange for foreign raw materials, a practice oxymoronically known as 'free trade imperialism.'"[44] Yet British economists like Adam Smith and David Ricardo pointedly ignored the reality that Britain's success was owed to protectionism, along with its imperial depredations. (As Michael Hudson archly observes, "gunboats do not appear in Ricardian trade theory," and "[w]hen the Native Americans refused to submit to the plantations system and its personal servitude, armed appropriation of their land drastically reduced their 'factor proportions.'")[45] Economic ideas evolve to serve power, including by avoiding information that cannot be used for the purpose. When England needed to catch up, Cary's protectionism held sway; when England held a lead, protectionism continued in practice but was jettisoned in theory, and a new crop of economists preached to the world "do as we say, not as we do." Luckily for several other European countries such as Germany, these new economic doctrines were ignored (until, following England's example, they became sufficiently developed to afford free trade and preach it to less-developed others).

As time went by, even Smith and Ricardo lost favor. They and other classical economists adhered to the labor theory of value, which Karl

Marx later used as the foundation of his theory that capitalist profits comprised surplus value expropriated from laborers.[46] Even worse, Marx tied the labor theory of value and classical economics to a prediction that economic evolution would inevitably proceed to socialism.

> The use to which Marx put Ricardo's labor theory of value rendered it anathema… After the 1870s, just as Europe initiated a new colonialist expansion that culminated in World War I, orthodox economists stopped theorizing about the stages of development and its foreign-policy aspects. So inextricably had Marx identified the evolution of capitalism with the emergence of socialist institutions that the minds of orthodox economists snapped shut. A kind of fatalism, epitomized by the factor endowment view of comparative advantage, supplanted doctrines of active government development strategy. In advocating the avoidance of active government policy, economists dropped their concerns with technology and productivity. Henceforth their theories were marginal in a pejorative sense.[47]

The labor theory of value was replaced by the theory of "marginal utility," which was far more soothing to the wealthy. Instead of value deriving from labor, the theory posited that value derived from subjective preferences. As such, there could be no unjust expropriation of labor in the economy, since the marketplace merely expressed the aggregate desires of interchangeable individuals and compensated everyone in accordance with how well they met the desires of other market participants.[48] Neoclassical economics was born and as if in reward for its services, endures to this day.

Politics entered into the battle of paradigms in economics.[49] At the turn of the century, economists whose work pointed out problems with capitalist economies were denounced as traitorous socialists, denied jobs, or forced to resign; some became neoclassicists. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the neoclassical school included a focus on the distribution of income and material welfare instead of "preferences." But after a brief spell during which the Great Depression forced some reality on the Pollyannaish neoclassical vision of capitalism, and World War II demonstrated the effectiveness of massive government intervention into the economy, the field retrenched in an ideological fantasyland. With the beginning of the Cold War, government and private funding for economics favored apologetics for capitalism, to be used in ideological warfare against the Soviets.

[I]t was not an improvement of knowledge or tools that led to the shift from classical and institutional economics to today's "antigovernment-neoclassical-rational choice" mainstream. It was the result of a redefinition of what economics should be concerned with – from a fair to an efficient allocation of resources – an effort that was generously funded by businessmen and the military in the name of cementing the power and legitimacy of their selves and their beliefs within society in a post-1929 Depression ideological Cold War world.[50]

Today, neoclassical economics has received withering (and unanswered) criticism from many quarters, from within and without the field,[51] and a mix of heterodox approaches has recently challenged its dominance.[52] Fundamentally, its worse-than-worthlessness is a consequence of its limited methods.[53] Mainstream economics has not yet found an equilibrium between Panglossian irrelevance and catastrophic failures.

Yet the failures this methodological kneecapping has produced may continue, since the selection pressure of needing to be ideologically congenial to the wealthy has proven stronger than the selection pressure for a science capable of providing policy guidance for an equitable and sustainable economy. After all, from the perspective of those benefitting from the financialization of the economy, the epistemic failure of mainstream economics is not a bug—it is a feature.[54] As two economic historians put it, "[t]he price for maintaining such a view has always been to ignore or deny all significant social problems and all significant social conflicts"—an attractively low price for those unaffected by such problems and conflicts—while "[t]he reward for maintaining this view is, of course, that one can sit back and relax, forget all the unpleasantness of the world, and enjoy one's dreams of the beatific vision and eternal felicity."[55] And, one should add, wealth.

Not only does mainstream economics have a track record of failure for the non-wealthy (and a record of success for the minority benefitting from financialization), but merely *studying* it has been shown to produce "debased" moral behavior and attitudes.[56] Furthermore, the negative effects of earning a degree in economics are long lasting; one study found that U.S. Congress members with an economics degree were significantly likelier to engage in corrupt practices than their peers.[57]

Regardless, the most pernicious effect of mainstream economics may be in crowding out alternative ideas. Take the issue of government debt, which the U.S. media in recent years has presented as if it were the

equivalent of household borrowing.[58] If a household borrows more than it can repay, bankruptcy awaits; this suggests that a similarly dire fate might await governments with too much debt ("look at Greece!"). Yet a government like that of the United States, which produces its own sovereign currency (unlike Greece), can never run out of the money it creates with a keyboard.[59] It does not even need to borrow, since like private banks, but without even solvency or capital adequacy restrictions, the government creates money *ex nihilo*. As Michael Hudson observed about the Great Recession bailouts:

> If there was a silver lining to all this, it has been to demonstrate that *if the Treasury and Federal Reserve can create $13 trillion of public obligations – money – electronically on computer keyboards, there really is no Social Security problem at all, no Medicare shortfall, no inability of the American government to rebuild the nation's infrastructure.* … Even more remarkable is the attempt to convince the population that new money and debt creation to bail out Wall Street – and vest a new century of financial billionaires at public subsidy – cannot be mobilized just as readily to save labor and industry in the "real" economy.[60]

This attempt to convince the population of an absurdity is all the worse in light of two considerations: the suffering and even death attributable to the crisis[61] and the existence of plausible solutions. The media never tires of propagating scare stories about "entitlements" driving the U.S. into bankruptcy[62]—whatever that would mean for a sovereign issuer of fiat currency.[63] At least in the most accessed medium, television, there is no discussion of proposals for a universal basic income, a government job guarantee, or doing again what was done during World War II: re-tooling factories *en masse*, this time to produce a fully renewable energy system. Ideas that deserve mere *awareness*, plus critical scrutiny, are absent from the U.S. media—much like ideas about Iraq's actual military capabilities and Iraqis' opinions on an invasion in 2002–2003. If mere facts have no wings, then entire economic theories and policy proposals do not either.

One proposal a democratic electorate might be interested in is called the Chicago Plan. To understand it would require an understanding that contrary to economics textbooks,[64] private banks do not intermediate between savers and borrowers and banks are not constrained in their lending by the loanable funds savers have deposited.[65] Instead, banks create

money *ex nihilo*, constrained only by solvency and capital requirements—but most powerfully, their own assessments (prone to the bias of "animal spirits") of profitability and solvency. And when banks create money via loans, they create deposits. As two IMF economists explained, "[t]he quantity of reserves is therefore a consequence, not a cause, of lending and money creation."[66] This is not how the monetary system is described in economics classes or the media. But the unavoidable conclusion is that "private banks are almost fully in control of the money creation process"—that is, "privately created deposit money … plays the central role in the current U.S. monetary system, while government-issued money plays a quantitatively and conceptually negligible role."[67]

The Chicago Plan would reverse this, putting private banks into the role of a saver-borrower intermediary they are already falsely believed to play, and government into the role of primary credit creator. First proposed in the wake of the Great Depression, the Chicago Plan won wide support among economists, but was never implemented due to resistance from private banks.[68] After detailing their analysis along with a simulation, the IMF economist-authors conclude that the benefits of the plan would exceed even those imagined when it was proposed nearly a century ago:

> The Chicago Plan could significantly reduce business cycle volatility caused by rapid changes in banks' attitudes towards credit risk, it would eliminate bank runs, and it would lead to an instantaneous and large reduction in the levels of both government and private debt. It would accomplish the latter by making government-issued money, which represents equity in the commonwealth rather than debt, the central liquid asset of the economy, while banks concentrate on their strength, the extension of credit to investment projects that require monitoring and risk management expertise.[69]

Regardless of whether this argument or that put forth by banks to retain their exorbitant privilege of money creation would be found convincing, the point is that the electorate cannot deliberate on an argument it has never been exposed to. That is, in an economy drowning in debt, stagnant wages, and underemployment, rutted into secular stagnation and regular crises, the citizenry is denied the opportunity to even learn about a proposal intended to solve these problem and others (government credit creation could be directed toward renewable energy and climate change mitigation). The information ecology or the

marketplace of ideas is impoverished or distorted as a result. Again, the normatively indefensible selection pressure of power leaves its mark.

4   WHAT THIS PERSPECTIVE SUGGESTS ABOUT CONTEMPORARY POLITICS

The election of the United States' first reality TV star president recalls how, ever since television became the predominant source of political information, U.S. politics itself has been uncomfortably close to a reality TV show. It was the *first* reality TV show, to the extent that access to the airwaves has been limited to a narrow ideological spectrum, restricting the options citizens have to choose from. In this sense, the "show" of politics is produced by those who control this means of communication—as A.J. Liebling quipped, "freedom of the press is guaranteed to those who own one." Real power is exerted behind the scenes, although viewers do get to vote on the occupant of *The Real World: 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue*.

It stands to reason from the perspective in this book that someone with a lot of TV exposure would have a good chance of being elected by a largely politically ignorant electorate (particularly when profit-seeking television networks discovered that he attracted a great many eyeballs to sell to advertisers). His widely disseminated persona as a successful businessman resonated in a society taught in schools and by the news media to believe that free-market capitalism is the best system of economic organization, if not one prescribed by God. And while many immersed in economic memes from reputable media outlets pointed out that by several objective measurements (like the most commonly used unemployment rate, GDP, and the federal deficit), the economy had recovered from the Great Financial Crisis, other objective measurements (median real wages, wealth and income concentration, inter-generational mobility, labor force participation, and household debt) indicated a great deal of economic suffering and anxiety among broad swaths of the electorate—fertile soil for a "change" candidate, even (or especially) one who breaks the rules of political decorum and strays outside of the ideological center—but an unfriendly environment for an establishment candidate.

Trump either devised or stumbled on an effective strategy: repeat memes from right-wing media outlets (not just Fox, but further right, fringe outlets), even if the memes are considered false and the outlets deemed disreputable by the ideological mainstream. As a Harvard study

of the online ecosystem concluded, a "sustained campaign of materially misleading political messaging … leverag[ing] basic psychological features of memory and belief formation … generated a pool of memes that could be recombined for mutual reinforcement … made into stories that created a folklore, reinforcing in-group identity and denigrating the out-group."[70] By repeating these memes and folklore, Trump seemed forthright and fearless to audiences of the same outlets, a rare truth-teller among a sea of lying politicians. So too with statements that crossed taboos against speech considered racist and sexist by the political elite—not only would these resonate with voters harboring racist and sexist ideas (memes about ethnic out-groups being genetically or culturally inferior and promoting the relegation of women to subordinate social roles), but also among those with ideas explaining their own economic woes as the fault of immigrants and "mooching" minorities (due to ignorance of accurate, more complex explanations, and facilitated by in-group bias). In-group bias under one of its many guises, partisanship, did the rest, with Republicans overwhelmingly voting for the Republican; the hypothetical median voter was not a factor.

The ultimate source of these ideas is the right-wing media, which has grown prodigiously since the late 1980s.[71] As this book's perspective would predict, in contradistinction to the view that media outlets merely adapt to citizens' (somehow) endogenously formed opinions, first came the rise in right-wing media and then came increased polarization in Congress and among the electorate.[72] This second wave of right-wing media, less intellectual and more entertainment-oriented than the first wave in mid-century, did not simply send ideas into the ether—it transported physical bits of information into tens of millions of brains. The recipients of such information were free to disregard it or reinterpret it in myriad ways, but the stark increase in political polarization (particularly on the Right) suggests that many chose to accept ideas from the newly opened right-wing floodgate, and shaped their political worldviews out of it. The estimated combined weekly audience for conservative television, cable, and (overwhelmingly) radio programming, 115 million, is over 50% larger than the combined weekly audience of nearly 75 million for centrist and liberal programming.[73] (The ratings data this back-of-the-envelope calculation used do not allow discounting for viewers/listeners of multiple shows; hence, the total weekly audience for all broadcast TV and radio political programming is undoubtedly smaller.) Hence, conservative and liberal views on social issues, but only conservative and centrist

views on economic and foreign policy issues, were easily, cheaply accessible. For left-wing views on economics and foreign policy, one would have to scour the blooming, buzzing overabundance of the internet. Yochai Benkler and colleagues explain that:

> [T]he highly asymmetric architecture of the media ecosystem precedes [Trump], as do the asymmetric patterns of political polarization, and we think it more likely that his success was enabled by a political and media landscape ripe for takeover rather than that he himself upended the ecosystem. Trump, as both candidate and president, was both contributing cause and outcome, operating on the playing field of an already radicalized, asymmetric media ecosystem. (Benkler et al., *Network Propaganda*, 19–20)

Yet Trump, as the logical (if large) extension of existing trends,[74] was not the most interesting phenomenon in the 2016 election. More interesting was how electoral propaganda and legacy media outlets were shown to have lost a great deal of their influence (at least influence from the analysis the media provides, if not influence from the airtime granted to eyeball-grabbing candidates). Had they kept the influence they enjoyed a decade or two ago, Clinton would have defeated Trump (had Jeb Bush, the winner of the early dollar vote, not already beaten him for the Republican nomination) on the strength of her support from most newspapers and TV channels and her significant advantage in ad spending. As many to the Left and Right of the political center have long hoped, the dominance of legacy mass media outlets over public opinion was eclipsed—pleasing the Left, by more participatory forms of media (social media, blogs, etc.), and pleasing the Right, by more conservative, partisan, but still commercial media outlets (Fox, talk radio, the websites of the newly christened "alt-Right," etc.—all of which could extend their reach through social media).

Much attention has focused on the role of social media and "fake news" in the 2016 election. Given the tiny margins by which Trump won, they belong on a long list of *necessary* causes: sexism, racism or "racial resentment," turnout by non-college-educated, older, and rural voters, insufficient turnout by ethnic minorities, working-class distress, battlefield casualties, James Comey, the DNC emails, automation, a last-minute surge in dark money, neoliberal economic policies, voter suppression and disenfranchisement, the Clinton campaign's strategy, and more (possibly even including inept Russian facebook posts). Yet as the authors of a Columbia Journalism School study observe, fake news

is a distraction from the larger issue that the structure and the economics of social platforms incentivize the spread of low-quality content over high-quality material. Journalism with high civic value—journalism that investigates power, or reaches underserved and local communities—is discriminated against by a system that favors scale and shareability.[75]

This is merely familiar commercial bias operating in a different media ecosystem, social media, where editors at legacy media outlets are replaced with new editors: those in one's online social network. Meanwhile, the panic over "fake news" is currently pressuring tech companies to tweak their algorithms to reshape the internet ecosystem in the image of the legacy media. Media researcher Jonathan Albright predicts that this "next era of the infowars is likely to result in the most pervasive filter yet: it's likely to normalise the weeding out of viewpoints that are in conflict with established interests."[76] The more things change, the more they (may) stay the same.

The other contender for most interesting development was the overperformance of the Bernie Sanders campaign. One need not go back as far as the days of the Red Scare to find disbelief that a self-described democratic socialist could nearly win a major party's nomination; early 2016 would do. His eventual loss is easily explainable: most regular voters in Democratic Party primaries are among the (relatively) politically knowledgeable, whose main lifeline to the realm of politics is the agenda-setting media, which favored the establishment frontrunner. The anomaly was his unexpected success. Like Trump, he was doubtless helped by an economy failing broad swaths of the population and a message closely calibrated to this reality, but he also seemed uniquely helped by the internet. Not only did he dominate on social media platforms, but he won a higher share of the vote in states with a higher proportion of netizens and in counties with greater broadband internet availability.[77] Since the internet provides a significantly different ecology of information than television and newspapers,[78] it should produce different effects on the formation of political opinions.[79] The vast breadth of the internet provides a greater variety of facts (and lies), arguments (sound and specious), perspectives (worthwhile and worthless), and interpretations (considered and kooky) than any television station or newspaper could *hope* to offer. Those who turn to the internet for political information have a greater chance of being exposed to ideas one may never find in the legacy media, including ideas like democratic socialism the U.S. legacy media has long considered verboten. The

2016 U.S. election (further) demonstrated that the internet has vastly changed the ecology of political information; if recent experience can justify any prediction of the future, it would be to expect the unexpected.

In Europe, the same prediction is sensible. While proponents of the European Union expected it to reduce the likelihood of the violent conflict that has soaked European history in blood, ironically some features of the E.U.'s design are recreating the conditions that led to Europe's last orgy of bloodletting. In the 1930s, applied liberal economic ideology created severe economic pain for majorities of Europeans, leading many to support fascist governments that rejected economic liberalism and used the state to intervene heavily in the economy to employ the unemployed and produce public goods.[80] Today's eurozone was designed according to similar liberal economic principles—namely the belief that capitalist economies produce a felicitous equilibrium if left without government interference[81]—and has reproduced similar economic pain. In this fertile soil, nationalist, xenophobic ideas are spreading, threatening the breakup of the E.U. if not renewed violence between nations. If history is any guide, to avoid the rise of the nationalist Right will require abandoning liberal economics for a more active state role (necessary also to transition from the current cyanide pill of an economy[82] to an indefinitely sustainable one). The problem then and now is that liberal economics is particularly attractive to those with wealth and disproportionate power over systems of government, media, and education. Liberal economics, thought by many at the time to have been delivered a fatal blow by the Great Depression and subsequent government-spending-fueled recovery,[83] has come back to dominance in the academy—helped by funding from those with enough wealth to find it palatable—and from there, to the minds of public officials and the highly educated.[84] Here again, the internet and the way it has reshaped the ecology of information may prove helpful for alternative economic ideas that threaten the relative wealth of a few and promise a reduction in pain for many. Until they spread more widely, the (near) future for the nationalistic, xenophobic European Right is bright.

5   Outline of an Ideal Media System

According to the liberal view, an ideal media system might look the same as the status quo in the United States. All are free to start their own media outlet, with government restrictions on this liberty limited to media like television and radio facing scarcity from the laws of physics. Freedom of the press is guaranteed (to all who own one). Media corporations or individual proprietors compete for audience share and audiences choose from

among their products, voting with their dollars and eyeballs. Government-funded media exists, but the majority of its revenues come from private donors, and its audience share is small. From a liberal perspective, this is a system suited for rational, self-interested, utility-maximizing individuals: competition in the market should produce a plethora of options citizens are free to choose from, the best defense against manipulation, deception, and propaganda. In a functioning marketplace, manipulative, deceitful, and propagandistic products should be weeded out in favor of more honest sources (how this happens without making the assumption of perfect information common in neoclassical economic models is unclear).[85] The result is that no one can beat the market; that is, no politician, party, corporation, interest group, etc. can evade critical scrutiny from a free market for media companies. There will always be some media outlet to recognize the opportunity to make money by doing good: exposing corruption and criticizing bad policy will be valued and rewarded by the marketplace. Doing bad for political actors will be prohibitively expensive.

Yet to believe that this accurately describes the contemporary U.S. media requires mere assumption; a look at media systems in other countries or even a few hours of channel surfing reveals just how few options the U.S. mass media offers (for political perspectives). Reporting on foreign policy rarely strays from the perspectives of the U.S. foreign policy elite and reporting on economic issues rarely strays from mainstream Republican and Democratic Party positions—which is far narrower than what is available in several other countries (and online). The liberal view does not obtain; the free market for media companies has failed, and the felicitous equilibrium it should produce is nowhere in sight. Instead, we have a distorted market: non-consumers receive benefits they have not paid for and consumers pay for benefits they do not receive; a funding model for television in which viewers are not the customers, but advertisers, skewing incentives; and political-economic power exercising a clear selection pressure over which ideas make it into the mass media. Instead of fulfilling the role imagined in the liberal ideal, the news media tends toward a free-market version of a propaganda system, with a variety of political-economic pressures in place of government diktat.

Perhaps one benefit of Trump's election was that it provided a clear illustration of the dangers inherent in the U.S. media system. Referring to the reality TV star's candidacy in early 2016, the CEO of CBS infamously said: "It may not be good for America, but it's damn good for CBS."[86] (Half a century earlier, a former CBS news director made a similar point with the opposite valence: that "[t]elevision makes so much [money] at its worst that it can't afford to do its best.")[87] A free

market is theorized to allocate resources in the most efficient manner to best meet consumers' needs; yet this free market for media companies resulted in nearly $5 billion in free coverage lathered on Trump.[88] In addition to the studies of foreign policy and economic coverage discussed in Chapter 5, U.S. media coverage of the 2016 election contradicts the liberal view and confirms the view argued here. Commercial pressures in a commercial media system resulted in an inordinate amount of free coverage to arguably the least qualified presidential candidate in U.S. history. What was bad for the country was good for media companies—and the latter won out.

The U.S. media system does not produce the beneficial outcomes predicted by the liberal view due partially to supply-side deficiencies, but other failures come from the demand side. Our minds are "designed" to accept and build on information we have absorbed as schemas; media stories that contradict widely held beliefs are likelier to be rejected, ignored, or distorted. If human beings more closely approximated the liberal ideal of rational thinkers, the present U.S. media system might work. However, contrary to this ideal, when the truth matches our accumulated knowledge, we desire it—but when it does not, we desire alternative facts. What then would an ideal media system look like, one calibrated to the minds we have, and which could provide the free market of ideas required for democracy better than the free market for media companies currently does?

Before proceeding, it may be helpful to conceptualize two evils we seek to avoid: Nicholas Garnham's "pap and propaganda"—the commercial dreck of the present U.S. media system, and the overt, intentional propaganda present in several media systems around the world where the state has taken power without granting democratic control—or Phillip Pettit's *dominium* and *imperium*, un-freedom caused by private or state domination. Domination is produced when one agent has the power of interference on an arbitrary basis over another: when an agent has "sway over the other, in the old phrase, and the sway is arbitrary."[89]

The media as a collective agent has the power of interference on an arbitrary basis over the citizenry, simply by omitting perspectives and information citizens would otherwise choose to obtain. This form of private domination is an evil to be avoided, and state domination, *imperium*, is an even clearer evil. Pettit notes, "almost all the main figures [in the classical republican tradition] treat the question of which institutions do best by freedom as an open, empirical issue, not as a question capable

of a priori resolution."[90] In the realm of the media too, the appropriateness of freedom (as governmental non-interference) is an open, empirical issue. We need not consider state domination an evil so great that we must open ourselves to private domination, or private domination an evil so great that we must open ourselves to government domination. We can plan to avoid both.

Perhaps we should follow the authors of the U.S. Constitution and tame this source of concentrated power through democratic control and checks and balances: turning the media into a *de jure* branch of government, under democratic oversight.[91] A government body, like the Federal Communications Commission, could be removed from the executive branch and established as an independent, fourth branch of government: the Democratic Media Commission (DMC). Its goal would be to ensure that the public enjoys a free market of ideas and information to inform its decisions, without any actor exercising domination through disproportionate sway. It could be governed by a board of commissioners, like the FCC, except with a total of nine: five of its commissioners elected by working journalists and four through elections using rank-order voting open to all citizens.

The DMC's remit would include analyzing news reports to check for bias and levying fines for misleading reports, persistent ideological bias, or lack of ideological diversity.[92] Ensuring great breadth of ideological perspective would be of the utmost importance: if some perspectives were excluded from "popular information and the means of acquiring it," then the goal of a free market of ideas, free of domination by any actor, would not be reached. This fourth branch of government would exercise power (granting the citizenry control) over media outlets reaching above a certain number of people—especially outlets that serve as the sole or primary source of news for a significant portion of the population. For smaller media outlets, with fewer resources to devote to providing a balance of diverse opinions, governmental interference would have to be different. Since the founding of the U.S., a strongly partisan, small-scale press has facilitated a lively political culture, and today it adds to the overall diversity of ideological perspectives. However, it threatens ideological self-segregation and the absorption of biased, inaccurate information that is held unperturbed in an environment walled off from challenge. To avoid this outcome, such media outlets could be required to provide rebuttal space for journalists from opposing sides of the political spectrum. People could still choose to ignore the airtime

or column inches devoted to rebuttals, but to ignore would require an active decision, rather than the passive operation of our psychology.

This proposal would add a more stringent layer of regulation, albeit regulation over which the citizenry would have some representative-democratic control. The commercial structure of the media would remain. The pressures of advertiser, owner, and source bias previously discussed would still be in operation. Media companies would then be trapped between the financial pressures of a competitive marketplace and the financial pressures of a new regulatory scheme using fines to punish non-adherence. This is not what the news media needs, especially at a historical juncture when the current newspaper business model is facing extinction and no viable replacement is on the horizon. Forcing media companies to take expensive measures (hiring additional journalists to provide a breadth of ideological diversity) by threat of fines will not work when journalism is flirting with economic extinction.

However, the current economic weakness of the news media can inform our proposal. Firstly, since the inception of the republic news media been subsidized by the government, and early television news was considered an important public service to be provided by the networks, a loss leader that would increase a network's prestige and build brand loyalty. It would not represent a reckless leap to revisit subsidizing the provision of political information. Secondly, the most widely blamed cause for the present crisis of journalism is the threat of the internet to its profit model. And what is the nature of this threat? For one, the internet has reduced the marginal cost of journalistic product to near zero. In other words, once a newspaper article has been written or a news program recorded, producing additional units costs nearly nothing. The internet has turned journalism into an economic activity with all the characteristics of a public good: zero marginal cost, non-rivalry in consumption, and non-excludability.

Since the internet has turned journalism as an economic activity into a public good, we have three options: ban the internet, allow market failure in journalism, or *treat* journalism as a public good. Despite the ridiculous or pernicious implications of the first two options, the third might still come as an unpleasant proposal for the owners of the news media, but with eminent domain law requiring adequate compensation to be paid for acquired property, only those bullish on the news media's economic future would have cause for great distress. The DMC could be

authorized to use eminent domain to buy distressed media companies (primarily newspapers), leaving commercially viable and successful companies alone.

Inspired by James Curran's proposal, the DMC would oversee the entry of several major new players into the media system, in addition to the newly regulated commercial sector.[93] First, failing newspapers bought by the DMC contain valuable assets: primarily, journalists and editors. These would be given funding, autonomy, and control, allowing them to choose whether to continue as online-only newspapers or to branch out into other journalistic projects online or on television. Second, organized political groups, from parties to activist organizations, would receive government grants (following the Dutch model) from the DMC to operate their own media outlets. Third, ethnic and political minority groups would also receive grants from the DMC (following the Scandinavian model) to fund publications and television programs to air on government-funded or commercial channels. Fourth, the DMC would create an independent television and radio station funded generously by government, which would hire only experienced journalists from around the world to govern television and radio station themselves, setting editorial policy without interference. (Additionally, all media outlets receiving government funding could be required to hire a certain percentage of foreign journalists to impede parochial, nationalist biases.) These four new entrants to the media system would need to have funding guarantees, indexed to inflation, so that neither the DMC nor Congress could use its purse strings to exert control.

Turning a large portion of journalism into a public utility would bring us back to the problem of a tyranny of the majority and government *imperium*. What we would need for a well-functioning journalistic public utility is a specifically republican institutional form. We would need safeguards to prevent a tyranny of the majority from exercising domination through a publicly owned media. The first mechanism would be having five commissioners elected by working journalists, with the other four being elected by the citizenry. Yet we would need a contestatory mechanism—in place of direct democratic control—for those whose interests are not being served by the media to remedy grievances.

A Media Ombudsman's Office (press council) led by an elected official could be instituted as a contestatory mechanism for those who feel the media and DMC are not tracking their interests.[94] The remit of the

Ombudsman would *not* be determining what is "better" or desirable, but ensuring maximum diversity including views some will unavoidably consider "worse" and undesirable. What is important is determining whether a perspective on an issue is in good faith or if someone is clamoring for space in the mediatized public sphere merely to propagandize in bad faith in furtherance of their interests. Like any system, one organized around providing maximum diversity can be gamed: one could define individual perspectives in such a way as to create an unmanageable number of them or to create an artificially low number. Drawing inspiration from the Declaration of Independence's "decent respect to the opinions of mankind," this problem can be avoided: political perspectives, philosophies, or worldviews commanding the allegiance of some significant fraction of the world's population would make the list. Within each of these broad trends of thought, diversity would remain essential: no one strand or sect would be allowed to define the overall trend, but instead, each would be represented by proponents who may disagree on finer points. This design could evade attempts to game the system by, for instance, a group with the goal of enlisting the U.S. to overthrow a foreign government creating half a dozen "competing" perspectives all arguing for military intervention, but with spurious areas of disagreement designed to generate an illusion of diversity and to crowd out or dilute anti-war perspectives. The Ombudsman's Office would be tasked with determining whether an excluded perspective is in good faith and is sufficiently unique and valuable to warrant inclusion.

The DMC could be instituted via constitutional amendment laying out the principles it is tasked with maintaining; if the commissioners and the ombudsman fail to live up to their duty of maintaining a free marketplace of ideas, citizens could bring suit in the courts to compel changes in keeping with the letter and spirit of the constitutional amendment. Citizens would thereby retain their freedom to choose the news that fits their preferences and fight for the inclusion of their preferred perspective(s); they would only gain additional freedom in the form of greater options in ideological perspective to choose from and be exposed to.

Objections of all sorts might be made to this proposal, but two are most likely. First, the expense: the Newspaper Association of America last reported $37.6 billion in annual revenue, the three top 24-hour cable news channels $4 billion, local TV stations $9.3 billion from news programs (roughly half of their total revenue of $18.6 billion), and network news programs $1.1 billion (estimated from their reported $809 million

in the first three-quarters of 2015).[95] We can use the S&P 500 average price-sales ratio of 2 (historically high) to calculate a rough estimate of fair market value from revenue data: $104 billion, from combined annual revenues of $52 billion. Hence, a democratization of the core of the US news media system would amount to a one-time expense of $104 billion and an annual expense of $52 billion (or roughly one-twelfth of the declared military budget). Second, the issue of social planning: this proposal *is* social planning, but it is merely replacing one set of managers and directors—the electorate itself and professional journalists—for another: private investors, media company owners, CEOs, and their undemocratically appointed managers and editors. There is no Edenic ideal threatened with defilement at the hands of an unruly mob; there is a broken, plutocratic system facing a proposal for democratic reform and renewal. Bree Nordenson points out, "[t]o survive, journalism and journalists need to let go of their aversion to Uncle Sam."[96] And as Tom Ferguson describes his "Golden Rule" as it applies to the provision of information in democracies: "In politics, you get what you pay for. Or someone else does."[97] The alternative to government as sugar daddy is not free sugar; influence will instead come from private sources more difficult to bring under democratic control.

Another objection deserves attention: if the profusion of options ushered in via cable led to many people avoiding politics altogether in favor of entertainment—and even the devolution of news programming into "journo-tainment" could not stop the tide—then in the modern, internet-heavy media environment would a democratic media system focusing on hard news and analysis from a variety of ideological perspectives simply turn off even greater numbers? This is possible, but by no means certain: there is evidence that many are turned off by the news media *because* it has devolved into journo-tainment.[98] Regardless, nudging viewers into watching the news and increasing opportunities for incidental exposure can stem the tide toward greater political apathy and ignorance. The commercial entertainment media can be enjoined to set aside a significant fraction of ad time for advertisements for news programming on DMC-funded channels, and entire commercial breaks can be granted to DMC-funded news shows to present five-minute summaries of the day's news coverage. In this way, even the most politically apathetic television viewer would be goaded several times a day into tuning into news programming. This would reduce revenue for television stations and advertisers, but the net result for society—just from a

reduction in advertising, not including the increase in levels of political knowledge—may be positive.[99]

These reforms have dealt with the supply side of the equation, but an ideal media system would also have to address the demand side. Among the features of our psychology least likely to be corrected, persuasion and processing through the peripheral route (System 1) stand out. Television is a limited tool, and ensuring our undivided attention during news programs is not one of its capabilities. Making news programs visually bland (Sovietizing rather than Foxifying) may stimulate central, effortful processing, but may also stimulate channel switching. However, one negative aspect of peripheral processing can inspire a good reform: if our System 1 is likelier to accept statements from an attractive person, perhaps television pundits should not be selected for their looks.

Given that the rational ideal is wrong about how we tackle moral questions (deliberate on reasons before making judgments), what can media outlets do to stimulate conscious, critical reflection on our gut-instinct moral responses? One possibility is that when making arguments for a political position that implicates morality, journalists should paint with all five colors of the moral palette. That is, to invoke care, fairness, loyalty, authority, and purity when presenting the case for any political argument, even if it associated with the Left. (This strategy has received experimental support in application to environmental issues.)[100] Debate moderators and talk show hosts can remind the audience from the beginning that the discussion is likely to engage their gut moral instincts and urge them to critically interrogate their reactions. At the end of the program, viewers could be given examples of how moral gut reactions were found over the course of the debate to be inadequate and where they would need to be thought through.

Due to the phenomenon of attitude inoculation, media outlets cannot provide balance to a story by giving the majority of the focus to one perspective (e.g., the President's), and a small amount to critics. Instead of weak balance being better than nothing, it may be worse. Media outlets need to be aware of this psychological feature and ensure that good-faith, well-supported arguments are given equal focus; even, or especially, when one side of an argument enjoys greater prestige and newsworthiness.

A more serious psychological maladaptation (in the modern era) is groupishness, our in-group and out-group biases. It is the bloody thread connecting wars, religious violence, ethnic conflict, and criminal gangs,

yet it also provides the psychological basis for solidarity and cooperation. The media can shape its presentations to mute our groupishness and readapt it to a globalized, interconnected world of mass societies. First, we know groupishness manifests in language with the linguistic intergroup bias—and that this linguistic bias can spur in-group bias when thinking about what we are reading or listening to. Journalists must be educated about the linguistic intergroup bias and learn to avoid it. Editorial writers and pundits especially should avoid "us" and "them" language, and journalists should refer to in-groups in the third person. News articles and television scripts should use specific language when describing the actions of governments; the "United States" has never bombed anyone, but the United States Air Force has. When describing in-groups, journalists should take pains to include negative information (which may be easier to do when many of one's co-workers are foreign nationals and likely members of different ethnic and religious groups). When describing out-groups, journalists should emphasize points of similarity with the audience's in-group(s) and out-groups' internal diversity: Muslims follow a variety of interpretations of their faith, as do Christians and Buddhists; Iraqis had many different perspectives on their government as well as the United States'; Russians run the gamut from authoritarian to liberal, and so on. Crime reports should avoid groupishness-piquing adjectives: what benefit is there in describing an accused murderer as a *Black* man, a rape victim as a *White* woman, or a drug trafficker as *Hispanic* (except in a local news report on a dangerous criminal at large)? Lastly, the media should emphasize the superordinate in-group *humanity*, making arbitrary national and ethnic boundaries subordinate and less salient.

Presenting negative information about audiences' in-group(s) is likely to arouse cognitive dissonance, along with any information that challenges widely held beliefs—prompting motivated, meaning-maintaining, *irrational* reasoning to reduce it. To encourage more rational responses, the news media can affirm the audience's self-image before presenting negative information about an in-group. For instance, before a report on evidence of torture in U.S. Army prisons, audiences could be reminded of U.S. government diplomatic support for political prisoners in some countries, or the U.S. government role in forging the Geneva Conventions; a report on the pedophilia scandal in the Catholic Church could follow a reminder of the good work that Catholic Charities performs around the world, and so on. To provide knowledge constraints on motivated reasoning about domestic and international politics, schools would be better

positioned than the news media. Parents who feel uncomfortable cognitive dissonance from textbooks that describe domestic and foreign evils perpetrated by their government should have no power to reject textbooks on the basis of their negative affect. With a fuller and fairer picture of the negative aspects of their country's history, citizens would be socialized with knowledge constraints that can impede motivating reasoning about current events, particularly those in which their government acts in ways that contradict widely held values (like self-determination in the case of coups and electoral interference, human rights in the case of U.S. government-supported dictatorships, etc.). Media audiences could even be encouraged by news anchors, pundits, and editorial writers to imagine the opposite of what they believe to avoid psychological biases the news may exacerbate. Here, journalists would need to popularize knowledge about psychological biases that affect our thinking about politics.

System justification tendency is another politically significant bias that the news media should mute or reduce. Criticisms of existing systems—of political and economic organization, criminal justice, wealth distribution, racial disparities, international relations, etc.—need to be given a great deal of sustained coverage and analysis. Otherwise, *ceteris paribus*, they will be ignored by a human psychology that finds acknowledging them painful. Before such critiques, to minimize cognitive dissonance and prevent irrational avoidance strategies, media audiences can be reminded that injustice has been a constant of human history; today, some of the grosser injustices such as feudal despotism and plantation slavery have been overcome, but every generation has the opportunity to bring society closer to justice. Positive aspects of existing systems can be emphasized and proposed fixes for their negative aspects discussed (including whichever small actions individual viewers and readers can take), to emphasize that problems are surmountable.

In covering war and threats of war, the media must heighten its sensitivity to psychological bias. It must avoid distortions arising from intergroup bias.[101] Media audiences must hear from a range of voices in "enemy" nations or groups: those supportive of their government and those opposed, along with a sampling of the variety of ideological perspectives in the population (e.g., Christian Iraqis opposed to Hussein, but fearful that a U.S. military invasion would be worse). Points of commonality between portions of the "enemy" out-group and the audience's in-group(s) should be emphasized. Above all, war must never be sanitized; psychological discomfort at the sight of a mangled body is an

inestimably lesser evil than the violence that turned a human being into a mangled body. Before and during a war, audiences must be reminded that war inevitably means death, disfigurement, rape, torment, and destruction affecting innocents along with combatants, no matter how smart the bombs used. Lastly, audiences must be reminded of relevant history—the Gulf of Tonkin and Iraqi WMD—whenever a case for war is being made in response to an alleged act of aggression, existential threat, or atrocity.

Lastly, an ideal media system would work hand in glove with the education system to stimulate a more complex, systematic style of thought among viewers and readers, to create the citizens democracy requires. Currently, little is known about what factors facilitate the development of systematic thought; however, in the media context, we could do worse than to apply Goethe's hypothesis that "when we treat man as he is, we make him worse than he is; when we treat him as if he already were what he potentially could be, we make him what he should be." Instead of catering to the lowest common denominator, the media should present complex political issues in their complexity, but breaking them down into more easily comprehensible parts. Pundits and editorial writers should provide models of systematic thought, while making their best efforts to *present* systematic arguments in an easily digestible manner. This may frustrate those who have developed only a linear or sequential style of thought, but over time, it may help spur additional development. Overall, the media is likely to be able to play only a supporting role in facilitating a systematic thinking style among the population; schools, parents and workplaces must do the heavy lifting. Nonetheless, if a supporting role can be played, it should.

6 FINAL REMARKS

"It does not take the ghost of a Marie Antoinette to realize that when the few declare war on the many, the millinery business is headed for bad times."
—Gore Vidal, "Clinton-Gore II"

Sandra Braman is correct in pointing out that information provides the backbone for all of power's other forms: instrumental, structural, and symbolic. Part of information's power lies in ignorance: what we are ignorant of cannot *inform* our decisions. The absence of information influences our decisions in different ways, but no less than the *presence*

of information. Hence the awesome power of the media: it can provide information for informed decisions, the backbone of democratic power, or it can withhold it. Facts, theories, proposals, and perspectives lack wings. Although our minds have an impressive ability to combine and create ideas, this cannot make up for a lack of specific information. Creativity cannot serve as a replacement to an informed understanding of politics.

Deaths totaling *several* 9/11s occur every day around the world due to a lack of food, billions endure the suffocation of poverty, the organized mass murder of war rages on, our economic system pushes our environment to uninhabitability, and every second we remain a computer glitch or human error away from nuclear apocalypse. These problems stand no chance of being solved if the means of mass communication are used to deliver information not about them, but circuses. (Bread sold separately.)

Our species has been astoundingly successful in spreading from a corner of Africa to conquering the planet. 252 million years ago, another species enjoyed similar success: *Methanosarcina*, a microbe that evolved a way to turn oceanic carbon into energy, converting it into methane.[102] So successful was this microbe that over the next few million years, its methane waste had exterminated 96% of species in the ocean and 70% of vertebrates on land. *Homo sapiens* is currently on pace to match this record; if our carbon emissions continue unabated and a climate tipping point is reached, we could even break it. Liberal democratic societies, as they have from their beginning, can "be fairly described as an organized assault on nature."[103] And in this war, we are "winning." I can imagine intelligent, *informed* life elsewhere in the galaxy, constrained by something like *Star Trek's* Prime Directive of non-interference, observing our planet from afar. Perhaps we are on a reality TV show, *Quasi-Intelligent Species of the Galaxy*, with alien bookies taking bets on our survival over decades. Being an Earthian, I would be ineligible to place a bet—but I wonder about the odds.

Since information is the foundation of power, without *popular* information and the means of attaining it cheaply and easily, we are guaranteed a tragic farce of a society. Like everyone, I am prey to informational biases of demand and supply; my beliefs are the result of gene-environment development interacting with the ecology of information I have inhabited. Like everyone else, I am radically ignorant: what I know is only an infinitesimal fraction of what I do *not* know, and my *unknown unknowns* are just as numerous as anyone's. Among the little I do know are spooks about grave threats to the species (itself a spook),

along with spook solutions to these problems. I believe my ideas are accurate descriptions of the world and what could be done to improve it—but so too does everyone. My truths are false on the other side of the mountain (in the U.S., I would not need to go further than my front door to cross the true-false border). As a Marine Corps' sergeant instructor once yelled at me, "excuses are like assholes: we all got 'em, and they all stink!" We all have memes, and since many of them contradict each other, they cannot all be true. Yet our radical ignorance prevents us from correctly separating the true from the false. No *one* of us can.

A Native American story has it that:

A young child was greatly frightened by her dream, in which two wolves fought viciously, growling and snapping their jaws. Hoping for solace, she described this dream to her grandfather, a wise and highly respected elder. The grandfather explained that her dream was indeed true: "There are two wolves within each of us, one of them benevolent and peace-loving, the other malevolent and violent. They fight constantly for our souls." … At this, the child found herself more frightened than ever, and asked her grandfather which one wins. He replied, "The one you feed."[104]

For a folktale, this is a fairly accurate depiction of the Janus-faced, competitive and cooperative nature evolution has produced; and of our capacity for good and evil.

Since none of us can determine the truth, we cannot know what food to feed which wolf. I see no other option than to follow Judge Learned Hand and presuppose "that right conclusions are more likely to be gathered out of a multitude of tongues." Is it "too easy a theodicy for truth" to expect that right conclusions *will* be gathered out of a multitude of tongues? Almost certainly. But are they *likelier* to be gathered out of a multitude of tongues than a restricted set? The choice is not between a proven failure and guaranteed success, but a proven failure and an alternative with no guarantee. I would stake upon it my all.

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