

03 August 2020

A Neurophilosophy of Divisive Politics, Inequality and Disempowerment

[Nayef Al-Rodhan](#)

Geneva Centre for Security Policy, Geneva, Switzerland

This is post five in a short-term series by Prof Nayef Al-Rodhan titled “Neurophilosophy of Governance, Power and Transformative Innovations.” This series provides neurophilosophical perspectives and multi-disciplinary analyses on topics related to power and political institutions, as well as on a series of contemporary transformative technologies and their disruptive nature. The goal is to inspire innovative intellectual reflections and to advance novel policy considerations.



The manifestations of the actual political divisiveness are remarkable in their abruptness, magnitude, and simultaneity across differing political contexts. Credit: [Unsplash](#)

If journalists, pundits, academics, and commentators of all stripes can agree on anything, it is that our current times are characterized by extraordinarily divisive politics. In the public domain, an entire vocabulary has been developed and elaborated in the service of making this point: people read, watch, and amplify selective information within their respective “echo chambers;” political discussions are “silo-ed” off from outside opinions dissonant from the insider point of view. These characterizations can be exaggerated, particularly given the force of repetition; as [Barry Eichengreen](#) reminds us in his concise new [book](#), periods of dramatic partisanship and attendant mudslinging are not new to neither Europe nor the United States. Yet the manifestations of this political divisiveness are remarkable in their abruptness, magnitude, and simultaneity across differing political contexts. Collectively they represent a phenomenon that is dangerous and destabilizing, one which policymakers must struggle to better understand and confront.

A neuro-philosophical account of this divisiveness and its relation to inequality and disempowerment is highly instructive. To better understand its underlying causes it is necessary to provide an account of human [emotionality, amorality and egoism](#). In conditions of instability and perceived vulnerability our neurochemically-mediated emotions, amorality and egoism are more easily invoked to justify narrow friend/enemy or in-group/out-group categorizations. While there are many contributing factors to popular feelings of insecurity, radical inequality is often thought—with good reason—to be among the most important. It is frequently exacerbated by inability or unwillingness of those in positions of political power to provide safe haven in times of political and economic strife.

FORMS AND MAGNITUDES OF INEQUALITY

Differing stories about the welfare of different peoples can be told depending upon the perspective taken and the data marshalled in its cause. On the one hand, institutions like the World Bank tout the “successes” surrounding the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), while critics observe that these goals have either been adjusted or in some cases literally redefined. The public is thus confronted with media reports indicating that food production continues to rise, and world poverty continues to (slightly) decline, while food insecurity and hunger actually continue to rise, as the UN has recently reported (see the [2020 report](#) on food crises). The World Bank in particular shed some credibility when it recognized MDGs relating to poverty expressed in real numbers would not be met, and thus changed the metric to a percentage of population (which was met, but only because population growth diluted the increase in raw numbers of those below the poverty-line over the given period).



While global poverty has shown some positive trends, domestic inequalities are approaching near-all-time-highs in many of the major economies. Credit: *Unsplash*

Moreover, while global poverty has shown some positive trends, domestic inequalities are approaching near-all-time-highs in many of the major economies. A great deal has been written in recent years debating the nature and extent of this inequality, yet the basic framework argued for by [Thomas Picketty](#) remains sound. Briefly, the much-referenced thinking of Kuznets, who argued that economic development exacerbates inequality initially but then naturally reduces inequality as growth deepens, economies of scale are established, and so on, is badly misleading. Kuznets was able to bring evidence to this argument only by drawing upon limited data. The leveling off and even decrease in inequality between 1930-1950 in the United States and the majority of European economies is treated as evidence for this virtuous process of economic development. An obvious problem is that the war years offer alternative explanation for great losses to captains of industry/holders of capital, on the one hand, and the uptick of labor in wartime economies, on the other. Nor is this mere supposition: when one extends the data-set to 2010, the re-establishment of trends in the growth of inequality resume and redouble after the wars. In summary, absent the shocks of WWI and WWII, inequality appears by all serious metrics to be expanding unchecked. As articulated in the [World Inequality Report of 2018](#), “If established trends in wealth inequality were to continue, the top 0.1% alone will own more wealth than the global middle class by 2050.”

NEUROPHILOSOPHY AND CONDITIONS OF SEVERE INEQUALITY

The fact that genuine survival threats, e.g. those related to food insecurity, can be clearly paired with the knowledge that responsible institutions fail to effect significant change has psychological and emotional consequences for those most effected. Similarly, the increasing awareness that fewer and fewer individuals hold the keys to power and wealth generation impressions of vulnerability. Given

our strong genetic inclinations to survive, which I have elsewhere explained under a rubric of a [predisposed tabula rasa](#), these emotions of vulnerability can directly translate to almost exclusively self-regarding behavior. On the other side, in the absence of institutional structures that guarantee widespread stability and opportunity, individuals who do well in circumstances of high economic disparity are likely to press their advantage. Put differently, without the achievement of socialized norms relating to solidarity and the general good, individuals will most likely pursue self-maximizing benefits, further deepening trends toward inequality and injustice.

The philosophical and theoretical frameworks that are most relevant to these observations belong to Hobbes, in classical political theory, and to the offensive realism of John Mearsheimer, in contemporary International Relations scholarship. The state of nature envisaged by Hobbes describes conditions wherein each serves as judge in his own case, mirroring the phenomenon of “regulatory capture,” discussed further below. In the absence of effective authority, it is to be expected that we decide cases in our favor and err on the side of self-protection and enhancement of our position, as opposed to generosity and its associated increase in risk. What Hobbes saw with impressive clarity was that the ‘*war of all against all*’ need not be a literal clashing of swords at all times but was better understood as an emotional condition. Hobbes argues that to distrust ‘one’s fellows’ in highly dysregulated and unstable circumstances is not merely reasonable but wise. In the realm of geopolitics, [Mearsheimer’s arguments](#) provide a tight conceptual analog by arguing that no state would cease in their pursuit of power merely at the point where they can defend themselves, but that instead they would always push for complete hegemony. Hobbes too had put forward a similar comparison when he asked his readers to consider the attitude of “sovereigns” eyeing one another with suspicion.

Less frequently considered in this connection is the principle inheritor of Hobbes’ social contract theory, John Locke. While Locke of course thought the state of nature benign and a ‘state of war’ far less likely/pervasive than Hobbes, he nonetheless articulated a central concern about the over-concentration of power (inextricable from an over-concentration in wealth, then as now). In a way that would prefigure the concerns of political domination by theorists like [Petit](#), Locke likened absolute power of a Hobbesian monarch to a roadside assault at dusk: once in the power of an assailant, there is no limit to what one might be made to endure, and thus all available means of resistance by those “vanquished, occupied, humiliated or persecuted”, are justified in avoiding being brought under the complete power of another. As in Hobbes (and later Petit), the point is not continual interference or exercise of coercion, but the potential for such interference or coercion at any time, which results in a particularly acute state of emotional distress.

More broadly, a populace is disempowered when inequality reaches a pitch that empowers those in positions of extreme wealth and power to act with impunity. The mere suggestion that a brutal and unchecked state, or non-state actor(s), could act without checks or legal limitations, feeds into the vicious cycle of vulnerability (especially that of the socio-economic-cultural have-nots) leading to further divisiveness. This counts as an instance of domination, alienation and discrimination, which functions not only through action but by holding particular acts in the realm of prospect.

Neurophilosophy adds further content to the connections between human nature, and inequality and disempowerment. Classical and contemporary political theory rightly highlight the emotional toll of feeling disempowered and/or of anticipating the possibility of abuses of power. From a neurophilosophical perspective, divisive politics, inequality – particularly extreme inequality – and disempowerment can be tightly explained in connection to human nature in new ways. Firstly, our nature explains why inequality and disempowerment exist in the first place and secondly, why overcoming these conditions is key to social cooperation.

Given our emotional, amoral and egoistic nature, divisive politics and sharp disparities in wealth and power can be extremely deleterious to social cooperation and the stability of the political order in the long run. Divisive politics, inequality and disempowerment are influenced by our innate predilections (i.e., emotionality, amorality, and egoism), and our moral compass is governed primarily by our “perceived emotional self-interest”.

We are deeply *emotional* beings and far less rational than previously thought. In fact, [the mechanisms of emotion and cognition](#) are deeply intertwined at all stages. For example, special focus here has been dedicated to the human amygdala (though it is not the only brain structure involved in emotional processes) which has a key role in processing fear (e.g. experiments showed that the presentation of threat stimulus led to activation in the left amygdala) but also other aspects of fear, such as observational fear, whereby part of the amygdala would become activated when observing another person undergoing fear conditioning (and later by anticipating that same danger befalling oneself). Instructed fear, which is unique to humans and depends on language, is believed to rely on the hippocampal complex. In any way, emotion leads to changes in ‘the formation and recollection of episodic memory’ through the modulation of attention and perception, and later on, the amygdala’s modulation of hippocampal consolidation – a “storage process by which memories become more stable over time”. Of course, the full range of neuroanatomical connections between emotion and learning is more complex, but this linkage described above highlights the deep bearing of emotions on learning and memories. In other words, emotions become quite literally engraved in the brain.

The effects of inequality in wealth and power described in classical political theory can now be understood and theorized in neuroscientific terms too. Fear and humiliation, which are unavoidable in extreme poverty and/or situations of total political disempowerment, will consolidate learning mechanisms that promote defensive postures and mistrust.

All of this comes with costs for social cooperation and political participation. Because we are fundamentally born *amoral* (meaning we are neither innately moral, nor immoral but will develop our moral compass in the course of existence and in response to circumstances in our environment), a social and political system that has many individuals powerless or struggling to survive will not enhance cooperative behavior. However, while we may not have any inborn preconceptions of right and wrong, we are born with a fundamental wiring for survival, which I describe as a basic form of *egoism*. Our egoism will push us to do whatever it takes to ensure our survival, including acts that are illegal or immoral; this also may include participating in the very acts that enable those in positions of power if that becomes tied to one’s survival.



Dignity-based governance is critical because it is the only paradigm aligned to human nature. Credit: **Unsplash**

These three facets of human nature cannot be divorced from each other: they are intimately intertwined and reinforce each other. In the service of our egoisms, our emotionality and amorality (and sometimes immorality) will challenge and oppose threatening competition and may attempt to derail it, especially in the absence of accountable and transparent governance structures.

That said, this same mechanism will apply to those in positions of power and wealth, who will seek too to maintain their status even if that leaves many others scrambling. Those who have the upper hand in any system will seek to maintain it – consciously or not – by playing on the emotional, amoral and egoistic facets of human nature. This is also true for *inequality*, in that most people who have the upper hand (personally, economically, politically and culturally), will aim at disempowering others and keeping a competitive advantage at all levels by utilizing, consciously or not, the three mentioned facets of human nature.

This neurophilosophical perspective offers a ‘template’ to understand relations at all levels: from personal to organizational, national and international relations. The remedy is as simple as it is highly difficult to achieve: creating accountable systems that guard against extreme inequalities and [unchecked power](#) is paramount to any social and political order.

SOCIAL SECURITY AND POLITICAL DANGERS OF DIVISIVENESS

These trends have both global as well as domestic consequences. One noteworthy outcome is that narrow global classes are being established whose members have much more in common with one another than with citizens of their respective nation-states. The interests and concerns of the global elite radically differs from the concerns of a wage-earners struggling to make ends meet across various national settings. What is even more disconcerting is that those occupying this rarefied echelon have tremendous influence in determining the [nature of institutions](#) that govern the societies they live in. Via a process known as regulatory capture, the wealthy and well-positioned are highly skilled in gradually taking over the agencies meant to serve as a check on the excesses of their own behavior. When this process is nearly completely realized in a particular sector (for example, bankers and lobbyists for other financial institutions setting the standards and limits for banking and finance), the likelihood of irresponsible behavior and consequence destabilization is dramatically increased. In the decade after the global financial crisis of 2008-9, eerily similar economic trends and risky investment strategies have reappeared in our current highly under-regulated environment.

At the level of the political interaction, [divisiveness](#) has the pernicious consequence of disrupting truth and reducing discourse to accusation. Any new information—from scientific studies warning of the severity of climate change, to information regarding ongoing medical pandemics—is politicized and categorized as mere talking points for one or the other side of the political divide. This process is epistemologically stultifying and presents obvious barriers to coordinating actions to address the issues at hand.

This is highly detrimental to domestic governance, but the consequences do not end there. Inequality, disempowerment and divisive politics have security implications within and beyond national borders, even if they take longer to manifest. Though unlike conventional military attacks, inequality and divisiveness erode national and international security. Systemic inequalities ultimately marginalize entire groups of people and undermine the rule of law and domestic stability. Revolutionary waves in past decades demonstrate that: civil unrest and war may be decades in the making but hard to contain when dignity deficits reach a tipping point. The instability will almost certainly spill over into regional crises. A vicious circle can emerge as many countries will choose to spend important resources on military capabilities thus taking away even more resources from their development plans. [Global](#)

[income inequality](#) also fuels migration tensions – with the attendant consequences in terms of social frictions and further divisiveness, as well terrorism recruitment, and transnational organized crime. Huge disparities in global wealth also affect the global order itself, leading to fragmented attempts to influence global institutions.

THE WAY FORWARD

There has always been a temptation for political parties to either amplify or downplay current events, but in conditions of [extreme divisiveness](#) and partisanship this temptation becomes especially consequential. Whether through omission or deliberate disinformation campaigns, political operatives skew public perception in an effort to garner support or to undermine the legitimacy of rivals. Recent crises surrounding refugee movements and mass migration into various European states are real enough, but both the magnitude and nature of these movements has been deliberately distorted by far-right groups. The predictable result of a rise in xenophobia and atavistic racial targeting flourishes when these emotions are mobilized to empower particular actors. Equally important, the susceptibility of populations to this rhetoric has a great deal to do with their instability. Wage stagnation, the dismantling of social safety-nets, and dramatically increasing inequality provide background conditions where false narratives flourish. These false narratives, in turn, easily feed further into divisive politics. The provision of stable welfare guarantees and the related emotional peace of mind they can deliver should thus be thought critical policy to address dangerous political divisiveness. It is in this context that initiatives for a [universal basic income](#) (UBI) must be given fresh (re)consideration. UBI has been dismissed or deferred on many grounds, yet from a neurophilosophical perspective, its benefits are enormous and with far-reaching consequences, increasing important indicators for any healthy society, and for social trust: security, agency, connection, trust and meaning.



The predictable result of a rise in xenophobia and atavistic racial targeting flourishes when these emotions are mobilized to empower particular actors. *Credit: Unsplash*

The political gains of promoting such policies are obvious: they stave off sources of instability and insecurity for states. But most importantly, [dignity-based governance](#) is critical because it is the only paradigm aligned to human nature. I define dignity as a comprehensive set of nine dignity needs that must be central to governance: *reason, security, human rights, accountability, transparency, justice, opportunity, innovation and inclusiveness*. The manifestation of the best or worst in our *emotional, amoral, and egoistic* nature is ultimately dependent on the choice of governance models and institutions we create.

Thus, left to our own state of nature, inequality, divisiveness and extreme disempowerment will occur – with predictable consequences of conflict, instability, insecurity, and unfulfilled progress and prosperity.

Important normative and legislative changes are necessary (within accountable and transparent governance structures) that balance the ever-present tension between the emotional, amoral and egoistic features of human nature with the nine dignity needs. Achieving this balance is the most certain way to check the excesses of human nature and insure less divisiveness, more equality and more empowerment for all, at all times and under all circumstances.

In the absence of dignity (in its holistic sense), the worst and non-cooperative facets of our nature will manifest, with catastrophic consequences for the social and political order. This includes acts of pre-emptive aggression. Because human nature is highly malleable and our moral compass strongly influenced by circumstances, governance everywhere must promote human dignity as a basic requirement for a symbiotic and cooperative social and global order.

by Nayef Al-Rodhan

Originally published on the [*Blog of the American Philosophical Association*](#).