Target article: 'Our Roots Run Deep': Historical Myths as Culturally Evolved Technologies

for Coalitional Recruitment

Authors of Target Article: Amine Sijilmassi, Lou Safra, Nicolas Baumard

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Abstract

Drawing on developmental psychopathology and thinking about the we-mode of social cognition, we propose that historical myths – be they on the scale of the family, the nation or an ethnic group – are an expression and function of our need to join with other minds. As such, historical myths are one cognitive technology used to facilitate social learning, the transmission of culture and the relational mentalizing that underpins social and emotional functioning.

Commentary

The contested nature of history, the invention of traditions, and imagined communities are integral to understanding the melee of human experience. In our commentary on "Our Roots Run Deep," we explore the interplay between historical imagination and individual identity through the lens of developmental psychopathology. Our aim is to illuminate how our self-conceptions, in relation to others, underpin fundamental aspects of human functioning —ranging from forming attachments and collaborating with others (echoing Freud's notion of "love and work") to rationalizing aggression.

The target article compellingly demonstrates how historical myths are uniquely suited to highlight the extensive mutual dependence within a coalition. While this argument is persuasive, we propose that it may represent only a fragment of the broader narrative. We argue that the profound resonance of historical myths lies in their ability to foster a sense of social trust through generating a state of collectivity – what may be termed a 'we mode' signalling a readiness to act together. Far from implying a fusion of identities, the we mode represents a dual level structure which simultaneously represents a notion of self and the independent perspective of another but embedded in a shared understanding of the world. The concept of shared cognition—an irreducibly collective mode of understanding—has been acknowledged by a diverse range of scholars, including developmentalists (Tronick, 2008), primatologists (Tomasello, 2019), philosophers (Tuomela, 2005), psychoanalysts from various classical schools (Winnicott, 1956), and an increasing number of neuroscientists (Gallotti & Frith, 2013; Schilbach, 2016). Gallotti and Frith suggested that each participant in a social interaction jointly intends to accomplish a particular outcome, necessitating the adoption of a "first person plural perspective"—termed the 'we-mode' (Gallotti & Frith, 2013 p.16). According to this view, the we-mode may be organized around cognitive and neural structures intrinsic to our individual make-up, arising from a unique developmental and evolutionary trajectory (Tomasello, 2019). Within the scope of shared intentionality, a 'joint agent' comes into being when aligned mental states enable a shared goal to be adopted. This alignment is grounded in a mutual respect, which stems from each participant

having a distinct role in the collaborative activity (Tomasello, 2016). The we-mode presupposes a mutual recognition of the subjectivity and humanity of the other—a recognition of the other as a person or agent as real as oneself, and an acknowledgment of the inescapable interconnectedness that characterizes the human condition (Tomasello, 2016, p. 5). The significance of historical myths for large social groups can be partially attributed to their ability to extend these interpersonal processes to the broader, more impersonal societal context. They are invariably designed to drive we mode function. Why is that important? The we-mode may be critical to establish a state of interpersonal trust essential for the most profound of human functions, the social transmission of knowledge: epistemic trust (Sperber et al., 2010)

The importance of we-mode and epistemic trust becomes obvious when weakness of self structures undermine the normal experience of we-mode and deprive the individual of epistemic trust and therefore of effective social learning. This is sadly too often the case in individuals who experienced childhood maltreatment and their capacity to learn from others is profoundly impaired. One of the characteristics of complex trauma is a loss of selfhood, which can result in frightening experiences of fragmentation, breakdowns in meaning and isolation – how can one connect with others, how can others connect to you if there is no self to which this connection can be anchored (Luyten et al., 2020).

In the context of the intrinsic intangibility yet necessity of selfhood, perhaps historical myths manifest this process writ large: we need to tell ourselves the story of who we are in order to maintain the sense of collective selfhood that is essential for the perception of group coherence and agency, but also in order to feel connected to others in our shared culture. Individuals who do not experience relational mentalizing, in which one sees oneself as accurately and benignly held in mind by others, respond by showing increased epistemic vigilance in relation to others. Historical myths are regenerative. They restore interpersonal trust in the individual whose personal experience could be expected to lead them to a state of epistemic hypervigilance – a profoundly socially maladaptive state at population level. Historical myths enhance this illusion of joining in a narrative generating the psychological experience of belonging and opening the mind to social learning without the barrier of excessive epistemic vigilance. In fact, few historical myths considered in the target article could not withstand excessive epistemic scrutiny. But that is not critical. The creation of an experience of continuity with the past, facilitating a collective mentalizing we-mode process counteracts vigilance and increases readiness to collaborate - yes. But more important, a readiness to learn from the other and be part of the human bucket brigade passing social knowledge from one generation to the next. Historical myths that operate on a national level are perhaps an appropriate priority of focus of the target article. But they are also part of community narrative which families, neighbourhoods, institutions weave to generate we-mode thinking to facilitate the social transmission of opaque aspects of essential knowledge. This involves constructing a shared narrative about our interrelations, enabling a form of collective cognition and vision, thereby paving the way for love, labour, and purposeful aggression.

The historical myths associated with contemporary populist extremism (ideas about nativism, about the loss of a group's traditional freedom at the hands of supranational institutions) might be understood as a response to this epistemic disruption and the need for a collective story that makes sense. We have conceptualised epistemic disruption as involving both pronounced epistemic mistrust (i.e., reduced faith in democratic processes) *and* pronounced epistemic credulity, or gullibility (i.e., that Britain's historical identity and national greatness is being deliberately undermined by the European Union): we have suggested that individuals who experience a sense of being separated from the minds of others around them are vulnerable to this epistemic dilemma.

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