Steven Livingston

The Nature of Beliefs. An Exploration of Cognitive Science and Sociological Approaches to the Crisis of Democracy

SCRIPTS Working Paper No. 31

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Series-Editing and Production: Dr. Anke Draude,
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Please cite this issue as: Livingston, Steven 2023: The Nature of Beliefs. An Exploration of Cognitive Science and Sociological Approaches to the Crisis of Democracy, SCRIPTS Working Paper No. 31, Berlin: Cluster of Excellence 2055 "Contestations of the Liberal Script (SCRIPTS)".

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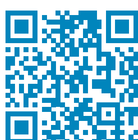

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The Nature of Beliefs

An Exploration of Cognitive Science and Sociological Approaches to the Crisis of Democracy

Steven Livingston

ABSTRACT

This paper constitutes the beginning of the final phase of a three-phase project that investigates democratic backsliding in the United States and elsewhere in the world. The first phase focused on the role of social media, concluding that political economics should be given greater weight when explaining the legitimacy crisis of authoritative democratic institutions. The second phase investigates the nature of radicalising organisations. This paper starts the third phase with a critique of the dominant positivist approach to investigating the embrace of extremist ideas. The paper reviews political scientists' adoption of cognitive science research methods and concepts, followed by a second approach rooted in the sociology of religion research literature. While the cognitive science approach looks to brain function to explain beliefs and their tendency toward intractability, the sociology of religion literature understands the nature of beliefs as a human response to precarity, especially during social and economic disruption.

1 INTRODUCTION

There is no credible evidence of systematic voter fraud in the 2020 US presidential election. In a review of millions of votes, an Associated Press investigation found only 475 isolated cases of illegal voting (Cassidy 2021). Scores of other investigations, statistical analyses, and court cases found no evidence of coordinated voter fraud (Eggers et al. 2021; Helderman/Viebeck 2020). Even the research firms hired by the Trump 2020 Campaign to investigate alleged fraud came up empty-handed (Dawsey 2023a, 2023b).

Yet despite the dearth of evidence, several opinion surveys in early 2022 found that nearly three-quarters of Republicans said they believed the election was stolen, a figure that was virtually unchanged from the previous year (Greenberg 2022). Of those who expressed this belief, 75% claimed their views were supported by evidence. Much of the purported "evidence", of course, consisted of a conspiracy theory, "dizzying in its delusional complexity", involving the Clinton Foundation, the Hungarian-American billionaire George Soros, the deceased Venezuelan strongman Hugo Chávez, and the Chinese government, with the assistance of Italian military satellites, Smartmatic voting software, and Dominion Voting Systems machines (Rutenberg 2023). By 2023, about half of the election conspiracists said they still believed hard evidence supported their beliefs, with the balance saying they had "suspicions". As Republican pollster Sarah Longwell (2022) put it, "[f]or many of Trump's voters, the belief that the election was stolen is not a fully formed thought. It's more of an attitude, or a tribal pose". Half-formed or not, the spurious belief that the 2020 election was stolen created the greatest political crisis in the United States since the Civil War. And at this writing, it is not over.

Election denialism is not the only persistent fact-free conviction floating around in the consciousness of some Americans. A June 2020 survey by the Pew Research Center found that a quarter of US adults see some truth in the "plandemic" coronavirus conspiracy theory, with 5% claiming that it is definitely true that the virus was intentionally released and another 20% saying it is probably

true that it was planned (Schaeffer 2020). The QAnon conspiracy theory offers another example of factually unmoored beliefs, one that overlaps with the stolen election and "plandemic" beliefs (Dwoskin 2021). According to a 2022 survey by the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), the number of QAnon followers actually *increased* after Donald Trump left office (Huff 2022). With noticeable symmetry to the percentage of Americans who suspect the coronavirus was planned, nearly one in four Americans expressed belief in the idea that the "storm" is coming. In QAnon argot, the "storm" refers to Trump's final triumph, when he will reclaim power, and his opponents will be put on trial and executed on live television.

QAnon is no longer solely an American phenomenon. In 2021, the Berlin-based Amadeu Antonio Foundation found that German QAnon groups and channels hosted on Telegram had grown significantly during the pandemic lockdown (Feldon et al. 2021). While QAnon made its way to Europe from the United States, other conspiracy theories made the reverse journey. French writer Renaud Camus, for example, claims in his 2011 book, *Le Grand Remplacement*, that immigration to Europe from Africa and the Middle East is the *intentional* result of policies advanced by "global and liberal elites", a coded reference to Jews (Bullens 2021; Langer 2021). These are not merely innocuous ruminations. White replacement conspiracy theory has inspired multiple mass shootings around the world, including several in the United States (Obaidi et al. 2022).

How do we explain the tenacious grip of such beliefs, held without supporting evidence? The most common scholarly answer to this question is found in the results of cognitive and brain science research. How readily do people change their beliefs, or in the terminology of the field, "update their priors", especially when presented with information that corrects factually unsound beliefs? On the whole, the answer is *not all that well*. People tend to cling tenaciously to their existing beliefs, facts notwithstanding. Why?

My goal in this paper is to describe two ways this question is addressed. I start with a review of the main contours of motivated reasoning research. People's expressed beliefs are said to be motivated toward either accuracy goals or partisan directional goals.[1] I also offer three criticisms of this approach. First, I maintain that cognitive science concepts and methods, when applied to the question of citizen's democratic competence, uncritically embrace an early 20th-century understanding of "the good citizen". Secondly, I argue it uncritically valorises social and political stability over contentious politics in an era of systemic injustice and inequality. Indeed, current social and economic conditions rarely come up in the literature. I contend that as a result of this blind spot, the motivated reasoning literature grapples with understanding the deep divisions that marble the American social landscape. A final point of criticism is closely related to the second. Because the crisis of democracy is, on the whole, understood to be an artefact of cognitive functions and not the result of material and social inequities, the motivated reasoning literature embraces clinical solutions, such as fact-checking and media literacy training programmes. These technical solutions, aimed at individuals, are designed to boost the signal of "good information" and demote "bad information". There are, of course, problems with both approaches. Those who need fact-checking the most are also the least likely to see a correction; secondly, media literacy initiatives might just as well exacerbate the cynicism that fuels the embrace of conspiracy theories and disinformation (Bennett/Livingston 2020; Huguet et al. 2019). Meanwhile, extreme social and economic inequality, the existential dread associated

1 Closely related research literatures also refer to other terms, including confirmation bias, cognitive dissonance, and selective exposure.

with catastrophic climate change, and the growing threat of calamitous nuclear war are elided.

Following this section, I turn my attention to the sociology of religion research literature, especially the work of Émile Durkheim and Peter Berger, and to sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild's notion of deep stories (2016; see also Gorski/Perry 2022). The sociological literature on religion pushes our attention away from the solipsistic gaze of cognitive functions and outward toward a closer consideration of lived experience. Seen from this latter perspective, expressed beliefs are matters of faith, often in the face of existential dread. As such, faith-like beliefs impart meaning in what feels to many like a chaotic, meaningless world; they offer purpose where there is none and community in the face of cold market relations (Berger 2011 [1967]). To be sure, deep stories are often unmoored by facts and marbled with racial and ethnic resentments, misogynistic prejudices, and resentments, though this is not always the case, and it is not inevitable (Gorski/Perry 2022). My goal here is *not* to valorise anyone's deep story. Instead, it is to *explain contemporary politics* in a way that pays heed to social and economic conditions.

I turn first to an overview of the cognitive science approach to understanding the nature of expressed beliefs in a democracy.

2 BACKFIRES AND MISFIRES IN ASSESSING THE UPDATING OF PRIORS

Award-winning German photographer Wolfgang Tillmans (2018), as guest editor of *Jahresring*, the prestigious German arts and literature publication, assembled a collection of essays entitled "What Is Different?". Accompanying the publication was an exhibit of Tillman's photographs at the celebrated Tate Modern Gallery in London. According to Tillman's introduction, the essays and photos interrogate the nature of truth. They take as their starting point Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler's 2010 research article "When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misperceptions". It is not often that a social science research article captures the close attention of the highbrow visual arts and literature scenes in Berlin and London. What is the backfire effect?

Nyhan and Reifler find that, in some cases, an effort to *correct* misperceptions actually *deepens the embrace of factually unsound beliefs*. Corrections *backfire* (Nyhan/Reifler 2010: 323). Subsequent findings lent support to Nyhan and Reifler's conclusions. For example, the conservative conviction that the Affordable Care Act ("Obamacare") in the United States involves "death panels" was found to be resistant to correction and vulnerable to backfire effects, as was the belief that President Barak Obama is secretly a Muslim (Berinsky 2017; Nyhan et al. 2013; on Obama's religious affiliation, see Nyhan et al. 2017). These are deeply troubling findings. If attempts to *correct* misperceptions with factually correct information produce the opposite effect, what hope is there for rational discourse, deliberation, compromise, and, ultimately, democracy? A misperception is defined as the extent to which beliefs about controversial factual matters do not square with the best available evidence and expert opinion (Nyhan/Reifler 2010: 305). Instead, deliberation and debate plunge into a regressive downward spiral of polarisation (Campbell et al. 1960; see also Bullock et al. 2015; Flynn et al. 2017; Jerit/Zhao 2020; Porter/Wood 2019; Shapiro/Bloch-Elkon 2008). More polarisation strengthens motivated reasoning, which creates more polarisation.

While Nyhan and Reifler's paper drew new attention to cognitive bias research, their results were not all that new or surprising. Similar conclusions

had been reached for decades.[2] In 1960, for example, Angus Campbell and his colleagues referred to "conceptual screens" that filter information uptake. People view the world through a partisan lens. Another prominent study in the 1960s concluded that "once formed, impressions are remarkably perseverant and unresponsive to new input" (Ross et al. 1975; see Jones/Davis 1965; Kelley 1967). Charles G. Lord and his colleagues (1979) concluded that "Individuals will dismiss and discount empirical evidence that contradicts their initial views but will derive support from evidence, of no greater probativeness, that seems consistent with their views". Arie Kuglanski and his colleagues also found similar results in several studies in the 1970s and 1980s (Kruglanski 1980; Kruglanski/Freund 1983; Kruglanski/Klar 1987).

In her highly regarded article "The Case for Motivated Reasoning", Ziva Kunda (1990, emphasis added) argues that people are motivated to "*arrive at an accurate conclusion*", and in other instances, they are motivated to "*arrive at a particular, directional conclusion*". When people are motivated toward accuracy, they expend more cognitive effort by devoting attention to relevant information and giving closer thought to its implications (Fiske/Neuberg 1990; Hill 2017). On the other hand, individuals may simply search for conclusions that are aligned with existing beliefs (Neuberg/Fiske 1987; Pyszczynski/Greenberg 1987; see also Dunning 1999; Gollwitzer/Bargh 1996; Higgins/Molden 2003). They are, in other words, interested in affirming existing beliefs (Pyszczynski/Greenberg 1987; see also Dunning 1999; Gollwitzer/Bargh 1996; Higgins/Molden 2003). While social psychology research has found that some persons have a higher "need for cognition" (for putting in the work necessary for accuracy) than others, all humans seem to respond to motivations of some sort.[3]

But what is less clear is what is meant by *motivation*. Kunda (1990: 480, emphasis added) herself sidesteps the issue, only saying that by motivation, "I mean any wish, desire, or preference that concerns the outcome of a given reasoning task, and *I do not attempt to address the thorny issue of just how such motives are represented*". She restricts her discussion to cases where "motivation can be construed as affecting the process of reasoning: forming impressions, determining one's beliefs and attitudes, evaluating evidence, and making decisions" (Kunda 1990: 480). Motivation is whatever is motivating.

Charles S. Taber and Milton Lodge, in one of the more important early efforts to apply cognitive science theories and methods to political science questions, also grapple with the nature of motivation. In their view, cognitive science studies "failed to arouse sufficient partisan motivation to induce much biased processing" (Taber/Lodge 2006: 756). Because cognitive dissonance researchers generally paid little attention to the strength of prior *affect*, research stimuli were not designed to elicit strong affective responses. As a result, earlier researchers had misconstrued the nature of motivation, or at least with political matters. "Selective biases and polarisation", Taber and Lodge (2006: 756) argue, "are triggered by an initial (and uncontrolled) *affective response*; by contrast, most of the work on selectivity and polarisation in social psychology uses rather cold

2 The literature offers a number of parallel investigations of what we are here simply calling motivated reasoning research. Confirmation bias and selective exposure research address similar questions (see Baranova 2019; Garrett et al. 2013). Investigations of cognitive schema and framing theory are also interested in similar questions (see Entman 2003). Scholars in behavioural economics speak of "nudge theory" (see Thaler/Sunstein 2009). For the sake of brevity and clarity, we limit ourselves to a consideration of motivated reasoning.

3 On predispositions to particular cognitive propensities, see John T. Cacioppo and Gary C. Berntson (1982); John T. Cacioppo, Feng Kao, and Regina Rodriguez (1986); John T. Cacioppo, Richard E. Petty, Jeffery A. Feinstein, and W. Blair G. Jarvis (1996); Arthur R. Cohen (1957); Arthur R. Cohen, Ezra Stotland, and Donald M. Wolfe (1955); Steven L. Neuberg, Jason T. Newsom, and Russell Green (1993); Donald R. Shaffer and Clyde Hendrick (1974); Donna M. Webster and Arie W. Kruglanski (1994).

arguments and rests on theories of cold cognition (most commonly, dissonance theory)". Fitting cognitive science models to the study of politics requires stronger motivational stimuli.

To accomplish this, Taber and Lodge use statements and arguments about affirmative action and gun control taken directly from various political interest groups. They understand these statements to be "far more contentious and more in line with contemporary political discourse" (Taber/Lodge 2006: 756–757). They also adjust their measurement scales to accommodate a greater range of affective intensity from hotter stimuli. In this more realistic political context (though still situated in a college political science course from which the subjects were drawn), Taber and Lodge (2006: 760) attempt to motivate accuracy goals by simply telling research subjects to "set their feelings aside", to "rate the arguments fairly", and to "be as objective as possible". Accuracy motivations took the form of verbal cues from the researchers.

Despite their efforts to motivate evenhandedness, Taber and Lodge found that only the least sophisticated research subjects, those with the fewest and least intensely felt affective priors, were willing to update their beliefs. Put more prosaically, those who showed little sign of emotional investment in an issue were the most willing to update their beliefs. After all, they hardly had any. Just the opposite was true with more sophisticated subjects. "Clearly, the prior belief effect is systematic and robust among sophisticates and those who feel the strongest, despite our best efforts to motivate evenhandedness" (Taber/Lodge 2006: 760). Taber and Lodge also found that the greater the affective predisposition, the more eagerly subjects downplay disconfirming information as they uncritically embraced information aligned with prior beliefs. "In short, despite our best efforts to promote the evenhanded treatment of policy arguments in our studies, we find consistent evidence of directional partisan bias – the prior attitude effect, disconfirmation bias, and confirmation bias – with a substantial attitude polarisation as the result" (Taber/Lodge 2006: 767).

But are factually unhinged statements of belief sincere, or are they a kind of performance art? In an effort to determine the sincerity of inaccurate statements of belief, Erik Peterson and Shanto Iyengar distinguish possible "cheerleading" from earnest but factually unsound motivated reasoning (Peterson/Iyengar 2021; see also Schaffner/Roche 2017). The cheerleading hypothesis argues that partisan respondents answer survey questions with knowingly incorrect responses to gain short-term psychic rewards. A conservative, for example, knows the answer he or she is giving is factually inaccurate but gives it anyway to get the satisfaction of "owning the libs". Conversely, the motivated reasoning hypothesis asserts that partisan respondents are sincere in their inaccurate responses.

Whereas Taber and Lodge offer verbal inducements to accuracy, Peterson and Iyengar offer monetary rewards. They reason that in the case of cheerleading, "providing incentives should markedly weaken the partisan divide" as partisans would be expected to revert to their "true" state of knowledge when responding (Peterson/Iyengar 2021: 138). Put more precisely, Peterson and Iyengar assume that USD 0.50 is motivation enough to reorient a subject away from cheerleading and toward an accuracy-seeking goal. Motivated reasoners, on the other hand, would not change what they regard as true, even when presented with an incentive to do so.[4]

In one part of the experiment, subjects were asked to select supportive information from two partisan news sources, two non-partisan news sources,

4 Incentive levels used in previous studies have varied from as high as USD 2.00 to as little as USD 0.10 (see Bullock et al. 2015; Prior et al. 2015).

or an expert source. Peterson and Iyengar assume that subjects incentivised for accuracy will turn to what they regard to be the more credible sources of information. Other randomly assigned subjects were not presented with the incentive toward accuracy. They found that the inducement to accuracy failed; a USD 0.50 per question incentive had little effect on respondents' search for information, leading to the conclusion that subjects were motivated reasoners. They *believed* what they were saying and saw no reason to change it, even with the inducement to do so. It seems that neither verbal encouragement to evenhandedness nor modest monetary rewards create motivations sufficient for the task of moving research subjects toward accuracy goals.

Ethan Porter and Thomas Wood, on the other hand, uncover evidence that corrections of factually unsound beliefs work, or at least they do not make matters worse. In an important 2019 article, they find no evidence in support of Nyhan and Reifler's backfire effect (Wood/Porter 2019). In the course of conducting five experiments with more than 10'100 subjects and 52 issues of potential backfire, they found no evidence suggesting that corrections trigger a backfire. "Overwhelmingly, when presented with factual information that corrects politicians – even when the politician is an ally – the average subject accedes to the correction and distances himself from the inaccurate claim" (Wood/Porter 2019: 160). Why? Once again, part of the answer involves motivation. Respondents shy away from the cognitive effort needed to formulate counterarguments to proffered corrections (Wood/Porter 2019: 160). Respondents in survey experiments may simply lack the motivation to resist factual information about relatively obscure topics, especially when the needed contextual information is not readily available. This distinction is subtle but important. Sufficient motivational intensity is situational. Seeking greater accuracy or directional confirmation of priors occurs in varying informational contexts. Are corrections readily available over time and undiluted by partisan counterarguments, or are they ephemeral and offered in a deluge of stimuli encouraging directional reasoning? To motivate accuracy, the intensity and duration of the corrective stimuli must be calibrated to the intensity and duration of directional cues.

In another article, Nyhan, Porter, and Wood (2022) look for ways to reconcile conflicting results concerning the persistence of misperceptions. In some cases, research suggests that misperceptions persist when driven by cues provided by party elites (Merkley/Stecula 2020; Tesler 2018). In other cases, exposure to corrections was found to increase the accuracy of people's beliefs, even when combined with competing partisan cues (Man-Pui et al. 2017; Mérola/Hitt 2016; Walter et al. 2020). Nyhan and his colleagues find that exposing people to more science coverage does not produce lasting corrective effects when subsequent exposure to sceptical content is readily available. Simply put, "the accuracy gains that factual information creates do not last; their effects wane over time and can be eliminated by exposure to skeptical opinion content" (Nyhan et al. 2022: 6). Even if the backfire effect lacks full support, we are still left with the conclusion that people are resistant to accuracy motivations, at least in complex and contradictory information environments.

There is another possibility, one that raises the intriguing possibility that we've been thinking about motivated reasoning in the wrong way. Cognitive science research literature, including studies conducted by political scientists, has understood motivated reasoning in binary terms. One is either motivated towards accuracy goals or directional goals. Porter and Wood offer an alternative dual processing model that sees both accuracy and directional reasoning occurring simultaneously, though at different levels. They put the point this way:

> When they encounter factual information that impugns or otherwise challenges claims made by their party, the typical citizen will be willing to pursue an accuracy goal, even as doing so causes them to implicitly distance themselves from a co-partisan's claim. Yet the pursuit of accuracy is limited only to the factual matter at stake. Questions related to vote choice and policy attitudes, which expressly ask them to reflect their partisanship, are more likely to activate the pursuit of partisan goals (Porter/Wood 2019: 7).

Subjects start pushing back against information that pokes at their deeper sense of meaning. Correcting factual matters – adjusting one's stated beliefs – operates separately from the much more demanding task of adjusting one's deeper connections to partisan identity.

There are strong hints of my eventual argument in Porter and Wood's dual processing model. Reconciling contradictory information "depends on how much they value the different items at play" (Porter/Wood 2019: 7). Correcting a discrete factual claim does not call for the same demands as reorienting one's partisan attachments (Porter/Wood 2019: 7). They continue, "[c]ompared to their partisanship, they are less invested in facts; this discrepancy permits them to pursue both accuracy and directional goals at once" (Porter/Wood 2019: 7). By not correcting the deeper attachments to party or policy issues, one remains aligned with deeper sources of meaning. *This observation is key to my efforts in this paper*. There is something deeper at play than free-standing beliefs. Porter and Wood (2019: 8) make the point this way: "If partisan allegiance functions like allegiance to a sports team or a religion, as some have put it, then it only makes sense that this allegiance will not be shaken by one corrective fact". Even more, we believe that it is reasonable to assume that expressed beliefs are themselves shaped by partisanship *that looks a lot like religion* (Green et al. 2002; Trothen 2019, emphasis added). Or as Lilliana Mason (2018: 20–21) puts it, "[m]ore often than not, citizens do not choose which party to support based on policy opinion; they alter their policy opinion according to which party they support. Big ideas shape smaller beliefs".

Putting this in terms of the cheerleading hypothesis, respondents are not so much "cheerleading" as they are "witnessing", to use a term drawn from Evangelical Christianity. Professions of faith are identity markers. They involve much deeper meanings. Taber and Lodge recognise that cognitive dissonance research underplayed affect and, therefore, make adjustments by introducing "hotter stimuli", statements about contentious issues, combined with more sensitive measures. In a sense, my claim is that the depth of meaning, the "heat" of motivations, is *still* underestimated by motivated political reasoning research. Beliefs are intimately tied to meaning-making, or to what Berger calls nomos. He writes that "socially established nomos" can be understood "as a shield against terror" (Berger 2011 [1967]: 22). This sense of meaning, this explanation of the world and the individual's role in it, provides stability and predictability. The alternative is the chaos and terror of what Berger, following Durkheim, calls anomy.[5] Just as a devout person of religious faith is called on to embrace metaphysical claims that stand outside physical proof, a devout partisan expresses beliefs lacking empirical evidence (Smith 2019). It is about who they are that matters most. In the closing section, I will return to this alternative understanding of strongly held beliefs.

3 IMPLICATIONS OF COGNITIVE SCIENCE MODELS FOR UNDERSTANDING POLITICAL BELIEFS

My goal in this section of the paper is to open space for considering an alternative approach

5 Durkheim's preferred spelling is "anomie". Berger uses an alternative spelling, "anomy".

to understanding political beliefs. Beliefs can, at times, be expressions of the profound anxieties and existential dread found in what Wendy Brown has called the "ruins of neoliberalism" (2019). My approach takes seriously the social conditions that give rise to what Durkheim calls anomie. Anomie emerges from social and economic disruptions, not merely brain processes. My argument is aligned with the conclusions reached by economists Anne Case and Nobel Prize winner Angus Deaton in "Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism" (2020). To the degree we look at political beliefs as a function (or dysfunction) of cognitive processes, we elide what is most required to fully grasp the current crisis of democracy. Further, the more we use cognitive functions as the premise behind our search for solutions, the more likely we are to ignore the glaring needs present in the physical world. In this way, the focus on brain function as the source of the current crisis of democracy is deeply conservative in its uncritical embrace of the status quo. I begin with a few observations concerning the limitations of the cognitive science approach when put to the task of explaining political beliefs. I then turn to the sociology of religion literature.

Several criticisms emerge from within the motivated reasoning research paradigm itself. For example, highly regarded studies relying on convenient research subjects, such as university students in a political science course, might be measuring that population's propensity to debate contentious issues – one of the normative aspirations of a university education (Cacioppo et al. 1983; Wood / Porter 2019: 161). The propensity toward counterarguing information might just as well be understood as a triumph of Western liberal education as it is a failure to live up to the expectations of citizenship in a democracy. But this is an often-heard criticism that does not signal a need for a fundamental reorientation of how we study belief systems. Other concerns focus on the core premises of the motivated reasoning research literature.

First, there is the matter of the surprisingly pollyannaish perspective on the discernability of unalloyed facts. Researchers assume a world of unambiguous facts which can, with proper motivation, be harvested by an inquisitive and open-minded searcher. Knowledge of the world is often not that neatly arranged. There may even be a kind of backfire effect prompted by fact-checking. Referred to as the "implied truth effect", its logic is simple: Because political discourse is often a matter of opinion and incomplete interpretation, not all statements are verifiable. Second, because many people are unable to distinguish between an opinion and a factual claim, people are often bad at distinguishing between statements that can be verified from statements that represent personal views. Some might infer that information found around an initial correction is accurate based on the rationale that if it was wrong, it would likely have been corrected, too. (Mitchell et al. 2018; Pennycook et al. 2020). In this way, fact-checking can make matters worse.

While these are all interesting and perhaps even important, I want to draw our attention to three other criticisms. First, cognitive science literature brings with it an unexamined premise concerning the nature of the "good citizen". Second, it valorises social harmony over contentious politics. Third, it places individuals and their brain functions at the centre of politics rather than social, historical, and economic conditions. I take up each of these criticisms in turn.

3.1 THE GOOD CITIZEN

Anxieties about the durability of democracy ran high in the years following World War II. With the Red Scare and the rise of conspiracy theorists such as Jack Welch, founder of the far-right John Birch Society, Richard Hofstadter (1964) was

led to conclude that there is a "paranoid style of American politics", one characterised by "heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy". Democracy in America seemed exceedingly fragile. After all, if a nation as sophisticated and well-educated as the German Weimar Republic could slip into brutal fascism, how could other democracies hope to survive? Adding to the anxiety were the unsettling results of polling data. Applying more advanced survey research methods following the war revealed an astonishingly shallow public understanding of the institutions and processes of government, current events, and even support for the basic principles of democracy (Prothro/Gregg 1960). Philip Converse (1975: 79) wrote that "the most familiar fact to arise from sample surveys is that popular levels of information about public affairs are, from the point of view of an informed observer, astonishingly low". There appeared a deep chasm between what democracy required of citizens and what citizens had to offer. For much of the past century, a steady stream of books and articles documenting the intellectual failings of American citizens issued forth (Delli Carpini/Keeter 1996).

But not everyone has drawn such a dire conclusion about the state of citizen preparation for democracy. Michael Schudson, in his landmark book "The Good Citizen" (1998), observes that an idealised version of the good citizen, captured by encomiums about the "rule by the people" and "we the people", has in historical practice been much more circumscribed. His critique centres on a corollary to the "rule by the people" ideal – the ideal of "the informed citizen". It emerged in the late 19th century with little connection to previous theories and practices of democracy. Yet this Progressive Era ideal of the good citizen uncritically informs the motivated reasoning literature applied to politics.

Varying understandings of the good citizen, argues Schudson, can be laid out over four imbricated eras – one layered over the next. In the 18th and early 19th centuries, the ideal citizen was understood to be someone who deferred to and affirmed the legitimacy of ruling elites. In the balance of the 19th century, strong local party organisations mediated citizen engagement with politics. Politics was characterised by tightly knit organisations with strong centralised leadership and an ability to mobilise voters with favours, material inducements, and no small amount of alcohol and entertainment. It was the era of "machine politics" (Clifford 1975).

The next era emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as a reaction to the corruption of the previous era. The Progressive Era reformers emphasised managerial efficiency (such as replacing mayoral systems with city managers and the professionalisation of municipal administration) and anti-corruption campaigns. President Teddy Roosevelt was the great "trust-buster". A second element of the Progressive era ideal emphasised the direct participation of citizens in politics and policymaking. Of course, to meet this expectation, citizens had to be well informed.

For Schudson, this is a wholly unrealistic ideal. In an essay, Schudson (1996: 362) notes that while it is right to wish for a better-informed public, it is "wrong to believe that democracy requires it". To think otherwise is "chimerical" and wrapped up in historical concerns as to who counts as a "gentleman" and with the proper moral rectitude as understood at the time. It also called for orderliness. "Those who spoke of the benefits of an informed citizenry for democracy were as likely to stress the need for orderly citizens who would learn obedience to the law as the need for critical citizens who would learn to vote wisely" (Schudson 1996: 363). Of course, it should be kept in mind that the Progressive Era reforms and its sense of moral rectitude did not extend to pushing back against Jim Crow racial laws and practices. As one historian has put it, "[t]he ideas of race and color

were powerful, controlling elements in progressive social and political thinking. And this fixation on race explains how democratic reform and racism went hand-in-hand in the Progressive Era" (Southern 2005: 2).

Rather than the fully informed ideal implicit in motivated reasoning literature, a more realistic expectation is for citizens to monitor their political environment more casually. The monitorial citizen collects information, shares insights, engages civic actors, and, when called for, demands accountability from institutions and political elites. The obligation of citizens to "know enough to participate intelligently in governmental affairs (is to) be understood as a monitorial obligation" (Schudson 1998: 310). Though we lack the time and space to describe it here, Schudson's argument inspired a fascinating debate among political communication scholars as to what constitutes the proper standard of citizen monitorial engagement and what can be expected from news organisations in the effort (Bennett 2010; Bennett/Livingston 2010; Livingston/Bennett 2010; Zaller 2010). This debate shares Schudson's rejection of the informed citizen model that emerged during the Progressive Era. The cognitive science-inspired political science investigation of motivated reasoning did not. It remained firmly moored in the unrealistic expectation that citizens ought to be fully informed and capable of preserving their informed status in an ongoing process of Bayesian updating.

3.2 MOTIVATED REASONING AND POLARISATION

A second criticism of motivated reasoning literature is its fear of polarisation. To the degree people embrace their own accepted beliefs – without sufficient regard for their factual accuracy, they grow progressively more distant from those who are themselves embracing their own uncritically accepted beliefs. Algorithmically curated online information feeds that serve up a continual stream of confirming and often extremist content deepen the crisis. Motivated reasoning leads to polarisation (Asker/Elias 2019; Bayes/Druckman 2021; Han/Frederico 2018; Su 2022). Indeed, polarisation is said to be tearing the nation apart and even raising the risk of a new civil war (Finkel et al. 2020; Walter 2022).

A starting point for much of the scholarship on polarisation is the observation that it arises from irrational impulses. One prominent article collectively authored by a platoon of some of the field's most accomplished scholars and published in the prestigious *Science* magazine begins by noting the considerable *agreement on specific issues* found among otherwise highly polarised partisans. Common ground, they note, remains "plentiful" (Finkel et al. 2020). And since polarisation is the result of symbolic constructs that undermine a hidden consensus, it can be remedied by other countervailing symbolic constructs. It can, for example, be addressed by "focusing on commonalities rather than differences". It can be remedied by addressing people's faulty perceptions and intuitions, such as "correcting misperceptions of opposing partisans". Creating incentives for "politicians and other elites to reduce their sectarianising behaviours" might also do the trick (Finkel et al. 2020). If the source of political differences resides only in people's minds, and not in material and social reality, then redress is found in proper messaging. The world itself outside of the human brain can be left as it is.

Daniel Kreiss and Shannon McGregor (2023) have offered a trenchant critique of this way of thinking about polarisation. They observe that much of the polarisation literature remains silent on – one is tempted to say unaware of – social and political inequality. Moreover, it is silent on how unequal political and social power plays out in the world, with historically marginalised groups making demands for justice and greater equality, followed

by "a powerful backlash from dominant groups, especially whites in the United States" (Kreiss/McGregor 2023). When analysis is sensitive to social and economic inequality, polarisation maps onto real social differences and partisan identity (Mason 2018).

> Partisanship is a mega-identity that encompasses these other deeply held identities, making it more consequential. Being a Democrat or Republican stands for many significant forms of social affiliation from religious beliefs and racial and ethnic identity to cultural preferences, and therefore politics is perceived by many as literally a matter of fundamental ways of life which come under threat during electoral politics and must be defended (Kreiss/McGregor 2023).

3.3 FOCUS ON COGNITIVE REASONING INSTEAD OF AFFECTIVE RESPONSE

Closely related to the inattention given to inequality and power by the polarisation literature is a parallel indifference to the idea that the "polarisation" formulation mischaracterises what is more accurately thought of as the rise of far-right extremism in the United States. From the Tea Party and MAGA to the Proud Boys and White Christian Nationalism, it is the drift of "conservatives" into illiberalism and authoritarianism that best describes the political landscape (Parker/Barreto 2013). As I shall argue next, the political far-right in the United States is manifested in an anti-democratic White Christian Nationalism, hyper-normative "John Wayne" masculinity, and a celebration of violence (which is closely tied to hyper-normative masculinity) (Du Mez 2020; Gorski/Perry 2022).[6] All of these movements can be reasonably regarded as revanchist reactions to marginalised groups asserting their right to political and economic equality (Kreiss/McGregor 2023). Understood in this way, it is not polarisation that constitutes the greatest threat to democracy in the United States and elsewhere. It is revanchist reactions to marginalised populations demanding greater social and material equality. Understanding the problem in this way casts a different light on the typical remedies suggested by cognitive science-inspired research. "Correcting misperceptions of opposing partisans" fails to address the root cause of contentious political discourse and beliefs. As Kreiss and McGregor (2023) ask about such "why-can't-we-all-just-get-along prosaisms", should citizens extend tolerance toward anti-democratic actors, ideas, and actions in the name of reducing polarisation? Their question brings to mind Karl Popper's "paradox of tolerance". If a society were to be tolerant without limit, its ability to be tolerant is eventually wrecked by the intolerant. "We should therefore claim, in the name of tolerance, the right not to tolerate the intolerant" (Popper 1945: 581). My main point here is that the logic of motivated reasoning literature might very well misconstrue the nature of the problem. To the degree this is the case, finding suitable solutions will be diverted into palliative measures.

4 INDIVIDUALS AS THE FULCRUM OF STABILITY/CHANGE

So far, I have addressed three possible failings of the motivated reasoning/polarisation model. First, I have argued that it rests uncritically on a Progressive Era understanding of "the good citizen". Second, it is inattentive to social and material inequality and political power when considering the ways to remedy polarisation. More fundamentally, I have asked whether "polarisation" is the most accurate way to capture contemporary politics. My final critique concerns motivated reasoning research literature's focus on the individual as the fulcrum of politics and reform.

6 Regarding the embrace of violence, see Cynthia Miller-Idriss (2020, 2021). For far-right post-modernism, see Robert J. Antonio (2000).

For decades, the policy framing literature has drawn attention to the implications of how problems are understood (Baumgartner/Jones 2009, 2015; Edelman 1988). Robert Entman (2003) identifies four elements of what he calls a substantive frame. First, is a condition a “problem”, a situation worthy of public anxiety and government redress? The problem status of climate change, gun-related deaths in the United States, and, at one time, the use of tobacco products have all been subject to framing contests. Are they, in fact, a “problem”? Second, if one of these issues *is* a problem, what are its causes? How do we attribute responsibility for the existence of the problem? For instance, is poverty the result of individual character defects, or is it a feature of capitalism? Is climate change anthropomorphic, or is it naturally occurring? How these questions are answered leads to a third aspect of a substantive frame: moral attribution. If poverty is the result of laziness and indolence, the moral failing rests with the individual. If it is the result of the nature of capitalism, the individual is absolved of responsibility, and the morality of capitalism itself is called into question. Fourth, policy solutions flow from the way the first three questions are answered. In the example of poverty, individual indolence does not support the creation of a generous training or welfare programme (doing so runs the risk of a “moral hazard” in the view of some) (Reich 2020), though recognising it as the consequence of systemic features of capitalism lends support to initiatives designed to ameliorate the harsher effects of market economics. If climate change is understood to be the result of human activity, particularly the burning of fossil fuels, policy solutions call for the abandonment of carbon-based fuels. If climate change is a natural occurrence, something out of the reach of human agency, nothing can be done.

On the whole, motivated reasoning literature and investigations of polarisation are framed in ways that *highlight the centrality of individuals* rather than as the result of larger social and economic structures. The attribution of responsibility for polarisation, so understood, rests with features of the human brain. If there is a moral attribution to be found, it has something to do with using algorithms that accentuate extremist content and news organisations that do the same. Corporate greed leads to optimising systems, including algorithmic ones, that leverage the vulnerabilities in how humans process information. Solutions often have something to do, as we have seen, with efforts to boost the strength of the signal of good information while mitigating the effects of bad information. These efforts are made through fact-checking and media literacy programmes. As we’ve just noted, framed in this way, social and economic inequality and asymmetrical power structures are largely ignored, as is the backlash generated when marginalised groups push back against power structures.

Nick Chater and George Loewenstein (2022) offer a similar critique of behaviour scientists’ efforts to correct social problems like polarisation with solutions that focus on individual-level brain functions. “The behavioural and brain sciences primarily focus on what we call the i-frame: on individuals and their thoughts and behaviours. Public policy, by contrast, typically focuses on the s-frame: the system of rules, norms, and institutions usually studied by economists, sociologists, legal scholars, and political scientists” (Chater/Loewenstein 2022: 4). I-frame interventions alone “are likely to be insufficient to deal with the myriad problems facing humanity. Indeed, disappointingly often they yield small or null results” (Chater/Loewenstein 2022: 6). Furthermore, undue focus on i-frame solutions might very well “draw attention and support from crucial s-frames changes” (Chater/Loewenstein 2022: 7). Recycling initiatives as a solution to the environment crisis draws attention away from the manufacturing of plastics in the first place. Similarly, programmes intended to incentivise individual retirement savings plans

puts the onus of responsibility for care of the elderly in the hands of the individual rather than as a matter of state policy (Chater/Loewenstein 2022: 15). "A sociological or political perspective [...] points to the real roots of retirement insecurity: a great shifting of risk from corporations to individuals. Workers can be urged to take all manner of "personal responsibility" for saving-but if their wages are stagnant while other costs are rising, it is hard to imagine that strategy really working" (Chater/Loewenstein 2022: 16).

To open up space for considering an alternative explanation of the perseverance of factually unsound beliefs, I have highlighted the conceptual innovation offered by Porter and Wood's dual processing model. It suggests that while people are quite willing to adjust beliefs in the face of new countervailing information, they are less willing to adjust underlying partisan convictions. I have also argued that the cognitive science research paradigm rests on an unrealistic expectation of the "good citizen" as it privileges individual-level theory and practical solutions. I now move on to sketching an alternative explanation of the persistence of political beliefs.

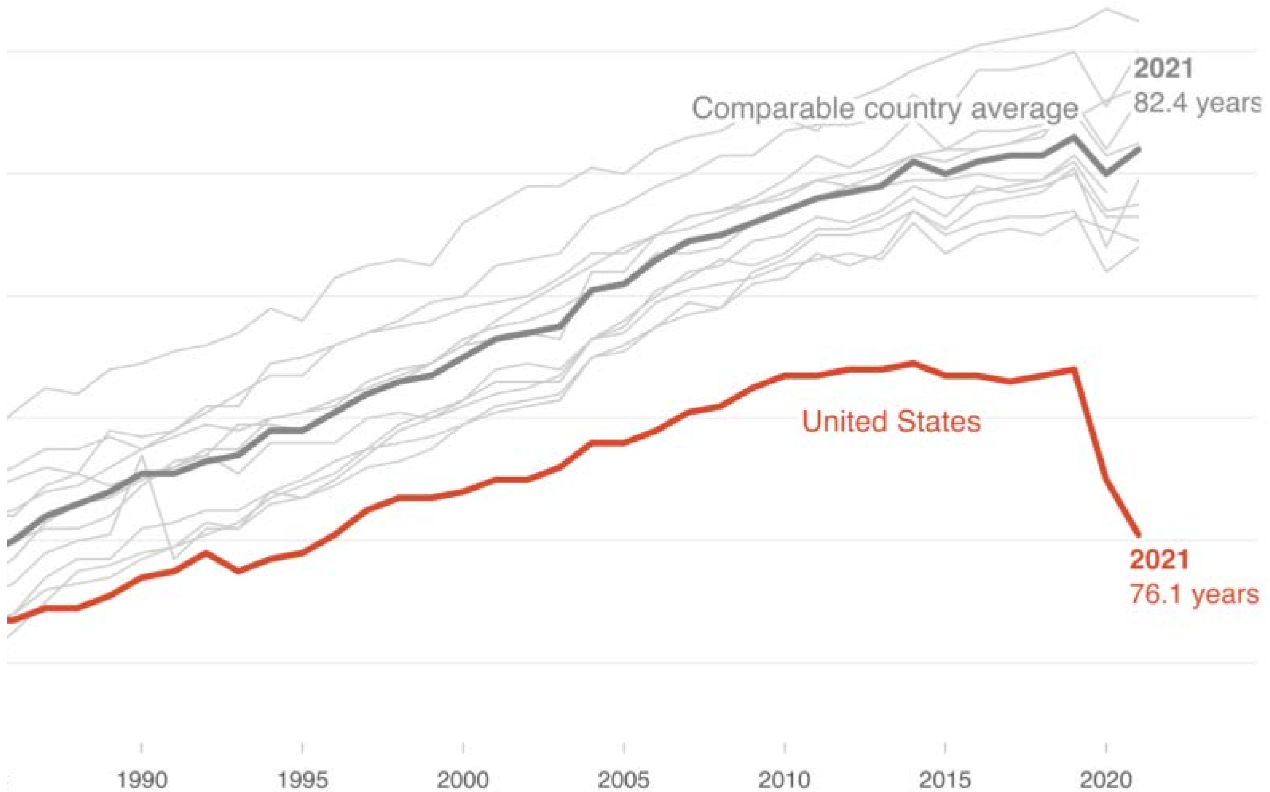
5 SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CONDITIONS AND BELIEFS

The starting place of the sociological perspective investigated here is in the human effort to adapt to the precarity of social existence. Beliefs emerge from lived experience. I begin, therefore, with a consideration of social existence in the United States in the 21st century. After 40 years of neoliberal economics, what is life like for the majority of its citizens? The principal reality of that existence is existential anxiety, precarity, and extreme inequality, which can be conveyed by several data points.

Considering wealth as the value of homes, automobiles, personal valuables, businesses, savings, and investments (assets) minus debts owed, how is wealth in the United States distributed and experienced?

- At the end of 2022, nearly 70% of the total wealth in the United States was owned by the top 10% of Americans. By comparison, the bottom 50% own 3% of the total wealth (Statista Research Department 2023).
- In 2022, *three* billionaires own more wealth than the bottom half of American society – 160 million Americans (Kirsch 2022).
- The 3 million wealthiest Americans are collectively worth more than the 291 million that make up the bottom 90% (Ivanova 2022).
- From 1978 to 2019, the compensation of CEOs of large corporations had grown by 940%. In that time, worker compensation, despite a massive increase in productivity over those same years, had grown by only 12% (Mishel/Wolfe 2019).
- From 1979 to 2020, net productivity rose 61.8%, while the hourly pay of typical workers grew far slower – increasing only 17.5% over four decades (after adjusting for inflation) (Economic Policy Institute 2022).
- From 1975 to 2018, according to a RAND Corporation study, the population below the 90th percentile in wealth would have been USD 2.5 trillion (67%) higher in 2018 "had income growth since 1975 remained as equitable as it was in the first two post-War decades". Astonishingly, the difference between the "aggregate taxable income for those below the 90th percentile and the equitable growth counterfactual totals USD 47 trillion" (Price/Edwards 2020). In other words, over the course of the neoliberal era, there was a USD 47 *trillion* transfer of wealth.
- In 2019, the average effective tax rate paid by the richest 400 families (0.003%) in the US was 23%, more than a percentage point lower than

Figure 1: Life Expectancy in US in Relation to Other Countries (Ahn 2023)



Source: Peterson-KFF Health System Tracker. Credit: Ashley Ahn/NPR

the 24.2% paid by the bottom half of American households (Ingraham 2019; Rogers 2019).

- In the first two years of the Covid-19 pandemic, about USD 42 trillion in new wealth was created. Two-thirds of that wealth went to the wealthiest 1% of the population (Fields 2023).
- In 2022, nearly half of Americans could not afford an unexpected USD 400 expense (Backman 2022).
- Approximately 43.8 million Americans have federal student loan debt. As of early 2023, the outstanding federal loan balance is USD 1.635 trillion. One is not absolved of paying a student loan back by declaring bankruptcy.
- Somewhere between 500'000 and 600'000 Americans are homeless (Meyer et al. 2022).
- Nearly 18 million households spend about 50% or more of their incomes on housing (Schaeffer 2022).

As stark as these numbers are, it is important to recall the less tangible toll wealth inequality takes on the average citizen in the United States.[7] Extreme inequality affects the less-well-off person's capabilities to flourish, understood as the effective freedom to choose between different kinds of life. In other words, to be poor is to be robbed of personal agency. To flourish, one must have access to good healthcare, housing, and education and *live to the end of a human life of normal length*. It involves the ability to enjoy the social bases of "self-respect and non-humiliation" and to be "treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others" (Nussbaum 2021). Wealth inequality is more than houses, cars, and other material items; it also "involves stature, a social respect" (Grusky 2001: 637).

Perhaps the clearest indicator of a lack of capacity is the inability to live to the end of a human life of normal length, as shown in Figure 1.

7 I take my inspiration from Amartya Sen (1999).

Across every demographic group, Americans die at younger ages than their counterparts in other wealthy nations (Simmons-Duffin 2023). In 2013, one study concluded that "American children are less likely to live to age 5 than children in other high-income countries" (Woolf/Laudan 2013). In the ten years following that 2013 study, trends grew worse (Yang/Young 2023).

Case and Deaton (2015) reported that working-age white men and women (especially men) without four-year college degrees were dying of suicide, drug overdoses, and alcohol-related liver disease at unprecedented rates. A 2021 Brookings Institution report reached the same conclusion. "The American dream is in tatters and, ironically, it is worse for whites" (Graham 2021: fn. 6).[8] While minorities in the United States objectively experience much harsher physical conditions and less access to health care, whites report experiencing more pain. What explains this? "As blue-collar jobs began to decline from the late 1970s on, those displaced workers and their communities lost their purpose and identity and lacked a narrative for going forward" (Graham 2021). Or, as Case and Deaton put it,

> Jobs are not just the source of money; they are the basis for the rituals, customs, and routines of working-class life. Destroy work and, in the end, working-class life cannot survive. It is the loss of meaning, of dignity, of pride, and of self-respect that comes with the loss of marriage and of community that brings on despair, not just or even primarily the loss of money (Case/Deaton 2020: 8).

Manufacturing towns and cities have seen their factories boarded up, they write, and "[i]n the wreckage, the temptations of alcohol and drugs lured many to their deaths" (Case/Deaton 2020: 28). "Destroy work and, in the end, working-class life cannot survive" (Case/Deaton 2020: 8; see also Buttrick/Shigehiro 2017; Schneider 2019). As they note themselves, Case and Deaton's work (2020: 8) is strikingly similar to Durkheim's investigation of suicides, especially what he called anomic suicide. Suicides of this type are related to dramatic social and economic upheaval. Durkheim saw suicide as a symptom of the collective breakdown of society (Mueller et al. 2021). This observation takes us to our next section. The same social and economic traumas that lead to deaths of despair signal a broader breakdown of anchoring belief systems. In short, they lead to anomie.

6 BELIEFS AS A FORM OF RELIGIOSITY

Recall that political scientists who adopted key concepts and methods from cognitive science face a problem with the operationalisation of motivation. How is motivation to be understood in motivated reasoning research? Kunda sidestepped the issue altogether, while political scientists, beginning with Taber and Lodge, turned to affected reasoning as a solution. Motivated reasoning, they argued, is laden with affective filters. But even here, there are challenges. Motivation toward accuracy goals often takes the form of relatively modest verbal cues asking research subjects to "be objective". Or, modest monetary rewards were used as inducements to accuracy. Almost all of these inducements to accuracy are met with modest results, if not outright failure, as with the hypothesised backfire effect – one experiment after the other, with slight variation in the presence of one treatment or another.

Researchers working in the motivated reasoning research paradigm have hit a wall. Study after study has reached the same or similar conclusion: though corrections work, after only a matter of minutes or, at best, a matter of days, beliefs revert to what they were prior to a correction. It would seem that *a deeper set of motives* pulls beliefs

8 See Carol Graham (2017) for a review of changing beliefs in the American dream.

back to some centre of gravity. But a "deeper set of motives" is difficult to measure, and any attempt would be difficult to replicate. This section of the paper hints at an alternative approach to understanding why humans come to believe what they do, often tenaciously. It is drawn from sociology, and more precisely, the sociology of religion and the human effort to manage precarity.

In "The Sacred Canopy", sociologist and theologian Berger describes the nature of the motives that inspire the search for beliefs. Humans are born into an essential social structure that imposes rules and norms that compensate for the absence of a complete instinctual capacity needed to survive the first years of life. Unlike most other mammals, a human infant remains vulnerable for several years after birth. Social norms and rules fill in the vacuum left by the absence of a more complete instinctual capacity. In what he calls "world-building", social structures appear natural and objectively true to those who are situated in them, even though they are wholly human creations (Berger 2011 [1967]: 22).[9] These structures include institutions, roles, and assumed identities. Through them, the individual makes sense of his life and of society. Berger calls the order and meaning they bring to life "nomos". The chaos and terror experienced in the absence of nomos Berger calls "anomy". Nomos are most effective when experienced as a taken-for-granted reality. Whenever the socially established nomos attains the quality of being taken for granted, there is a merging of its meanings with "what are considered to be the fundamental meanings inherent in the universe" and where "institutions are legitimated, to the point where the institutionalised actions appear self-evident to their performers" (Berger 2011 [1967]: 43).

It is for this reason that "radical separation from the social world, or anomy, constitutes such a powerful threat to the individual" (Berger 2011 [1967]: 32). In extreme cases, "he loses his sense of reality and identity" (Berger 2011 [1967]: 32). In some cases, the sources of disruption to nomos are specific to an individual, such as in the experience of death or divorce from a significant person in one's life. In other cases, the disruption is broad and experienced as a loss of status of an entire group to which one belongs. The statistics of economic precarity for most Americans in the 21st-century signal such a break with what was for so long assumed. "Not only will the individual then begin to lose his moral bearings, with disastrous psychological consequences, but he will become uncertain about his cognitive bearings as well" (Berger 2011 [1967]: 33). The ultimate danger in such a situation is meaninglessness. "This danger is the nightmare *par excellence,* in which the individual is submerged in a world of disorder, senselessness and madness. Reality and identity are malignantly transformed into meaningless figures of horror" (Berger 2011 [1967]: 33).

Berger's argument parallels Durkheim's closely. For the latter, religion is not only a social creation it is an expression of society. According to Durkheim, religion is the worship of a given social order.

> Now in order that these principal aspects of the collective life may have commenced by being only varied aspects of the religious life, it is obviously necessary that the religious life be the eminent form and, as it were, the *concentrated expression of the whole collective life. If religion has given birth to all that is essential in society, it is because the idea of society is the soul of religion* (Durkheim 1912, emphasis added).

Though socially created, religion is the power of the community itself that is being worshiped. Society's power over the individual transcends

9 Berger's theory of religion is in many ways replicated in his book with Thomas Luckmann (see Berger/Luckmann 1967).

individual existence so that people collectively give it sacred significance (Durkheim 1912: 427).

Berger speaks of legitimation in describing the relationship between the sacred and society. Again, closely following Durkheim, Berger says the "sacred is apprehended as sticking out from the normal routines of everyday life, is something extraordinary and potentially dangerous, though its danger can be domesticated in its potency harnessed to the needs of everyday life" (Berger 2011 [1967]: 38). To domesticate it is to put it in the service of legitimating a given social order. Legitimation involves "reality maintenance" and takes the forms of "proverbs, moral maxims and traditional wisdom" (Berger 2011 [1967]: 44). Elsewhere he describes them also as myths, legends, or folk tales. Some of these stories are sacralised as religion.

> It can be described simply by saying that religion has been historically a most widespread and effective instrumentality of legitimation. All legitimation maintains socially defined reality. Religion legitimates so effectively because it relates the precarious reality constructions of empirical society with ultimate reality. The tenuous realities of the social world are grounded in the sacred *realissimum*, which by definition is beyond the contingencies of human meanings and human activity (Berger 2011 [1967]: 46).

Religion, in other words, "legitimates social institutions by bestowing upon them an ultimately valid ontological status, that is, by *locating* them within a sacred and cosmic frame of reference" (Berger 2011 [1967]: 46).

Whereas Berger speaks of proverbs, moral maxims, traditional wisdom, myths, legends, and folk tales, Clifford Geertz speaks of culture, which he describes in this way, "Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning" (Geertz 1973: 5). Geertz directs us out of the laboratory and into the field. This approach is precisely what Hochschild (2016) does with her investigation of "deep stories". In her five-year investigation of the deep story of the poor, white Louisiana residents living in what is sometimes called "cancer alley" – owing to the inordinately high cancer rates found among those who live among the poorly regulated chemical plants and oil refineries of the Mississippi Delta, Hochschild describes their "world-making" deep story. It involves perceived violations of fairness. They see themselves as working hard and metaphorically waiting in line for their hard-earned rewards for doing so. But looking ahead, they see people cutting in line. These people are assisted by liberal politicians and other elites, by outsiders. According to their deep story, these cheats are people of colour, women, immigrants, refugees, and even Brown Pelicans (a bird put on the Endangered Species List) (Hochschild 2016). From this deep story, beliefs follow.

Hochschild offers a quite sympathetic view of those trying to manage the social disruption following social and economic disruptions. According to Philip S. Gorski and Samuel L. Perry (2022: 3), White Christian Nationalism is also a "deep story" about America's past and a vision of its future that "includes cherished assumptions about what America was and is, but also what it should be". Though not speaking of deep stories or nomos, Kristen Kobes Du Mez says something similar is at play for many American evangelicals and their embrace of White Christian Nationalism. She says the "belief that America is God's chosen nation and must be defended as such – serves as a powerful predictor of intolerance toward immigrants, racial minorities, and non-Christians" (Du Mez 2020).[10] Elsewhere, she says that for some evangelicals, the Christian gospel is "inextricably

10 For more on the patriarchic nature of Christian nationalism, see Beth Allison Barr (2021).

linked to a staunch commitment to patriarchal authority, gender difference, and Christian nationalism, and all of these are intertwined with white racial identity" (Du Mez 2020).

For Robert P. Jones, something like a nomos or a deep story is found in white supremacy, especially – though by no means exclusively – in the American South. Many southern whites regard their culture as God's most favoured creation. Yet somehow, the creator allowed the South to be defeated in the Civil War. "The central question was a theodicy dilemma: how to square the ideas of providential power in white Christians as God's chosen people with military defeat" (Jones 2020: 89). As Confederate political ambitions faded, the new battle was transported from the more contentious political arena, were disputes are settled with military violence, to the more routine political arena" (Jones 2020: 89). The war of ideas came to be known as the religion of the lost cause, first found in a book by that name published in 1866 by Edward Pollard. In it he calls for a "war of ideas" intended to sustain southern identity. As Jones (2020: 90) recognises, "[a]ll cultural movements need a core organising idea". At its core, the organising idea revolves around white supremacy. Gorski and Perry reach similar conclusions.

> White Christian nationalism's "deep story" goes something like this: America was founded as a Christian nation by (white) men who were "traditional" Christians, who based the nation's founding documents on "Christian principles". The United States is blessed by God, which is why it has been so successful; and the nation has a special role to play in God's plan for humanity. But these blessings are threatened by cultural degradation from "un-American" influences both inside and outside our borders (Gorski/Perry 2022: 4).

Here is the point: The motives that the more clinically motivated reasoning research fails to grasp are found in deep stories, in webs of significance, that revolve around perceived competitors in precarious times. The more extreme and uncertain the times, the greater the pull to find belief systems that guard the vulnerable from the chaos and terror of meaninglessness. We live in an era of neoliberal precarity for the many that encourages fearful tribalism. As Gorski and Perry (2022: 8–9) put it, White Christian Nationalism "is rooted in white supremacist assumptions and empowered by anger and fear". They then quote political philosopher Steven Smith: "Nationalism is loyalty to one's tribe 'but always at the expense of an outgroup, who are deemed un-American, traitors, and enemies of the people'" (Gorski/Perry 2022: 8–9). In the search for meaning in a world made meaningless by extreme social and economic conditions, our thinking turns tribal but not necessarily factual. Solutions here are not found in clinical adjustments to citizens' symbolic inputs; they are found in fundamental changes to the way society treats its own children. It is not possible in a society, in any economy, that finds that the wealth of three people is matched by the wealth of 160 million of their fellow citizens.

7 CONCLUSION

This paper has served as a *preliminary* exploration of the nature of beliefs and how scholars can go about understanding their formation and persistence. In that respect, it has tried to offer fair representations of divergent research literature devoted to that goal. This effort has required a broad and far-reaching narrative. In the end, however, there is an irony. Political science research inspired by cognitive science investigations of motivated reasoning has failed to grasp the deeper nature of human motivations. Rather than cognitive sciences' cold cognition research stimuli, political scientists have recognised the affective quality associated with information processing. But even so, I believe because of the necessities of the inherited research methods and

processes and the understood professional obligations of the behaviouralist research paradigm, grasping the nature of the human need for meaning has eluded them. What is required is a different approach. Rather than looking solely at the recesses of the human mind, we must look at social and economic disruptions and their impact on systems of meaning, or what Berger has called nomos. It was Lennon (1970), not Lenin, who reminded us that “God is a concept by which we measure our pain”. People are in great pain.

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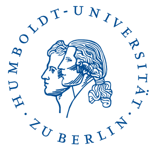

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