**The Evolutionary Psychology of Mass Mobilization:
How Disinformation and Demagogues Coordinate Rather Than Manipulate**

Michael Bang Petersen¹

¹Department of Political Science, Bartholins Allé 7, DK-8000 Aarhus, Aarhus University,
Denmark, email: michael@ps.au.dk

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Highlights

- Violent mobilization is often attributed to manipulation from, for example, demagogues.
- The human mind contains psychological defenses against manipulation, also in politics.
- Mass mobilization requires that the attention of group members is coordinated.
- Demagogues and disinformation can be explained as tools for achieving coordination.
- Mobilized individuals are predisposed for conflict rather than manipulated into conflict.

Abstract

Large-scale mobilization is often accompanied by the emergence of demagogic leaders and the circulation of unverified rumors, especially if the mobilization happens in support of violent or disruptive projects. In those circumstances, researchers and commentators frequently explain the mobilization as a result of mass manipulation. Against this view, evolutionary psychologists have provided evidence that human psychology contains mechanisms for avoiding manipulation and new studies suggest that political manipulation attempts are, in general, ineffective. Instead, we can understand decisions to follow demagogic leaders and circulate fringe rumors as attempts to solve a social problem inherent to mobilization processes: The coordination problem. Essentially, these decisions reflect attempts to align the attention of individuals already disposed for conflict.

1. Introduction

Some of the most significant - and some of the most terrible - events in human history involves large-scale mobilization of people in support or active pursuit of conflict for a political cause. The rise of Nazism in the lead-up to the Second World War and the genocide in Rwanda are extreme examples. Both examples illustrate two common features of such mobilization: The involvement of strong leaders and the intense circulation of propaganda or disinformation. Even when large-scale mobilizations are fueled by normatively desirable outcomes, such as rebellions against authoritarian regimes, such factors are key.

In this review, I ask: What are the psychological processes underlying large-scale mobilization of individuals for conflict-oriented projects? The focus is on the specific psychological role fulfilled by (a) strong leaders, (b) propaganda and (c) fringe beliefs in the context of successful mobilization processes. Understanding this role is of essential importance in current political climates where we witness a combination of political conflict, the emergence of populist leaders and concerns about the circulation of "fake news" on social media platforms.

A frequently-cited perspective is that large-scale mobilization for conflict-oriented projects reflects the use of propaganda by demagogues to *manipulate* the opinions of lay individuals by exploiting their reasoning deficiencies. Here, I review the emerging evidence for an alternative perspective, promoted especially within evolutionary psychology, which suggests that the primary function of leaders and information-circulation is to *coordinate* individuals already predisposed for conflict (1, 2**, 3). As reviewed below, human psychology contains sophisticated defenses against manipulation (4**) and, hence, it is extremely difficult to attain large-scale mobilization without the widespread existence of prior beliefs that such mobilization is beneficially. Furthermore, a range of counter-intuitive features about demagogues, disinformation and distorted beliefs is readily explained by a coordination perspective.

2. The Manipulation Perspective

A classical view within psychology is that human reasoning is error-prone (5) and, in line with this view, political scientists have argued that citizens lack interest in and knowledge about basic political processes and institutions (6), that their opinions are easily swayed by seemingly irrelevant and irrational factors (7) and that they tend to rather blindly follow the campaign messages of the leaders from their preferred political party (8).

From this perspective, citizens are easy victims of manipulation attempts from political entrepreneurs. Thus, in the literature on understanding violent mobilization, a common argument is that propaganda portraying the enemy in dehumanizing terms (as "vermin" or "cockroaches") is of key importance to remove psychological barriers to commit violence against other humans (9). Similarly, a number of studies have shown associations between, on the one hand, prejudice against minorities and support for discriminatory practices and, on the other hand, support for authoritarian leaders (10, 11), suggesting that exposure to the messages of such leaders could fuel prejudice (12). In the context of current political events, researchers working with versions of this perspective has also linked cognitive laziness and "fake news" sharing (13*) and linked lower cognitive ability and support of Trump in the 2016 US presidential election (14).

3. Evidence for Epistemic Vigilance

Recent studies suggest that people are less persuadable by political campaigns than a strong version of the manipulation perspective entails (15**, 16**). More generally, there is increasing evidence that humans are, in fact, exceptionally skilled at identifying reasoning flaws and dubious claims when evaluating arguments (4**, 17).

From an evolutionary perspective, this is not surprising. Humans are a social species with complex communication, designed for life in non-kin groups where conflicts of interest would naturally occur. Psychological designs that allowed our ancestors to be easily manipulated would face significant fitness disadvantages, while there would be strong selection for the evolution of psychological designs for epistemic vigilance (18).

4. The Coordination Problem

In order to understand the role of demagogues and disinformation in successful mobilization for large-scale political conflict, researchers within evolutionary psychology have focused on the coordination problem and the underlying psychological mechanisms designed over natural selection to solve this significant adaptative problem (1, 4**, 18, 19).

Human conflicts are most often group-based (20). The focus of the manipulation perspective is that groups can emerge by aligning the preferences of potential members through manipulation. Importantly, however, analyses of group-based conflict entail that having a shared preference for conflict is not enough for actually forming a formidable group. In addition to the problem of free-riding, any group faces the coordination problem, i.e., the problem of "establishing a mutual understanding among many different minds" (21). Even if all agree about a goal, coordination about how and when to achieve this goal is required.

Coordination problems abound for all collective action but they are particularly central to group-based conflict. First, while it is not a settled debate (22), some evidence suggests that group-based conflict in the form of warfare has constituted a heavy selection pressure in human evolution (23). If you fail at getting your group together to build a hut, you might get wet when it rains and you can always try again tomorrow. If you fail at getting your group together when the enemy group comes over the hill, you are dead. Second, in group-based conflict, coordination is in itself a source

of greater fighting ability (21, 24, 25) and, hence, group-based conflict essentially is an arm's race of coordination. Many other problems of collective action require the group to meet some absolute threshold of coordination. In conflict, the threshold is always relative to the other group: your group needs to be better coordinated than the enemy (26).

Because of this, there is reason to believe that the identification of intergroup conflict activates specialized mechanisms, which evolved to promote coordination within the group. The operations of these mechanisms provide an alternative explanation for a range of phenomena often attributed to manipulation.

5. Mechanisms for Coordination

5.1. Following Authoritarian Leaders

Rather than demagogic manipulation, increasing evidence suggest that the association between preferences for authoritarian leaders and support for aggression reflects a causal effect from aggression to such preferences. Thus, in experiments, primes of intergroup hostility - but not other forms of threat - increase support for such leaders (2**, 19). Individuals who seek aggression thus seem to promote authoritarian leaders (referred to as "dominant" leaders in the literature) to leadership positions.

In general, leadership and followership evolved to solve coordination problems (21, 27) and there are reasons to expect that authoritarian leaders will solve these coordination problems to the benefit of those who seek aggression (19). Authoritarian leaders often have aggressive personalities themselves and, hence, are more likely to choose this focal point rather than others. Also, authoritarian leaders are more likely to aggressively enforce collection action, thereby also providing a solution to the free-rider problem. Consistent with this coordination-for-aggression perspective on preferences for dominant leaders, such leader preferences are specifically predicted

by feelings of anger rather than, for example, fear (28, 29, 30), suggesting that people decide to follow dominant leaders to commit to an offensive strategy against the target group (28).

This perspective also explains highly counter-intuitive features of the appeal of demagogues. If followers search for the optimal leader to solve conflict-related problems of coordination, they will seek out candidates who are willing to violate normative expectations by engaging in obvious lying (31**) and who displays a personality oriented towards conflict, even if such personalities under other circumstances would be considered unappealing (2**).

5.2. Circulating Propaganda

Propaganda is intimately tied to group-based conflict. In line with the manipulation perspective, this could be because the propaganda changes individuals' perceptions of the other group; hence, instilling the preferences for conflict. Alternatively, it could be because the propaganda facilitates coordination among those who are already disposed for conflict.

In ethnic massacres, the involved propaganda typically emphasize that the enemy is (a) evil, (b) strong and (c) about to attack and does so by emphasizing difficult-to-verify enemy actions involving extreme brutality (32). Furthermore, as emphasized by Horowitz (32), the extremity of the preceding rumors indexes the brutality of the following massacre. From a psychological perspective, it is unclear that the content of such propaganda is well-suited for persuasion. If the rumors were taken at face value, the response should be to flee. Instead, the rumors coordinate action by saying: "This is what needs to be done and it needs to be done now!" Consistent with this, recent research shows that motivations to share negative rumors about political groups within current democracies are strongly related to support for political violence (33). This relationship is stronger than the relationship between support for political violence and motivations to believe such rumors,

suggesting that violence-oriented individuals are motivated to share even though they might not believe the rumor.

Another propaganda tactic is moralistic in nature. Thus, in less violent forms of group-based conflict, including in the context of modern social media discussions, an often-used tactic is to direct attention towards a group's or person's violation of moral principles. Moral principles are effective tools for large-scale coordination because they suggest that the target behavior is universally relevant (1, 34*, 35). Consistent with the coordination perspective, however, recent research suggests that the motivation to broadcast such violations can reflect attempts to mobilize others for self-interested causes. Thus, the airing of such moral principles, referred to as moral-grandstanding, is strongly motivated by status-seeking (36*) and there is increasing evidence that the acceptance of moral principles shifts flexibly with changes in self-interest (37).

5.3. Signaling Fringe Beliefs

The coordination perspective does not necessarily imply that people do not believe in propaganda. But it suggests that such belief can be an effect rather than a cause of the felt need for action. For example, recent work on self-deception suggests that people are motivated to believe in useful information because it makes them more efficient in relaying this information to others (38, 39*).

Statements of beliefs can also serve a central coordinating function in themselves. For coordination purposes it is highly valuable to know who are ingroup members and who are not. Over human evolutionary history, a large number of physical tools to signal group membership has evolved such as clothing styles, paint and physical ornaments. Statements of beliefs can serve a similar function, even beyond the obvious "I am a in" (40). In particular, statements that signal knowledge or beliefs that would not occur unless a person was member of the group are extremely useful. Statements that contradict common sense or established facts are one such example, like religious

statements such as "God is one and three at the same time" or political statements such as "Obama was born in Kenya" (41*). Consistent with this, recent evidence shows that political affiliation is a strong predictor of statements of belief in fringe stories such as conspiracy theories and "fake news" (3, 42**).

In this way, the psychology of coordination helps explain why people happily believe preposterous things without a need to resort to notions of manipulation. From a coordination perspective, the primary function of fringe beliefs is thus not epistemic but social: They serve as a signal to others about your allegiances. Fringe beliefs can be said to be believed in the sense that an individual frequently and sincerely refers to them but they do not necessarily constitute "practical beliefs" in the sense that behavior is any different compared to the counter-factual situations where this belief had not entered the representational systems of the individual. In fact, part of their attraction might be that they have no practical consequences and, hence, there are no feedback loops that can correct them (43*).

6. Achieving Coordination

The coordination problem implies that mobilization processes often have a tipping point dynamic, with mobilization suddenly erupting (44). Empirically, this has been shown to apply widely, also to mobilization around projects that many believe are normatively desirable such as anti-smoking (45). When coordination around a moral or political project has been achieved within a group, this tipping point dynamic is furthermore fueled by silent bandwagoning of neutral audiences as people do not object or speak out due fear of retaliation or condemnation from those endorsing the emerging consensus (44, 46). Historically as today, these processes are accelerated by the use of communication technology from pamphlets over radio to social media. These allows for the rapid identification of ingroup members, the spread of coordinating information and the targeting of dissidents (47*).

7. Conclusions

Successful mass mobilization in the context of social conflict often co-occurs with demagogic leaders, the circulation of unverified rumors and the airing of weird beliefs. Because such mobilization can also involve extreme behavior, including violence and massacres, a traditional view is that mobilization occurs because the masses have been manipulated. In this review, the recent evidence against this view has been discussed and it has been argued that it is helpful to understand some of the seemingly irrational phenomena surrounding mass mobilization as reflections of a psychology designed for solving the coordination problem. Demagogic leaders, false rumors and bizarre beliefs thus help align the attention of individuals already disposed for conflict.

Overall, the effects of the coordination problem on mobilization processes are dual. On the one hand, the existence of the coordination problem means that groups and societies can be stable even if they contain large minority segments of individuals who share disruptive, violent or prejudiced views. On the other hand, the existence of the coordination problem also implies that this stability can be quickly undermined if suddenly coordination is achieved. Not because people are manipulated; but because a sufficient number of them direct attention to a particular set of preferences simultaneously.

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