

BOOKS & ARTS



A member of a Sunni extremist group during a protest in Lahore, Pakistan, last month.

A. ALI/AP/GETTY

Like minds can be small minds

An adviser to US President Barack Obama argues that people's tendency to seek out those with similar views can entrench extreme opinions. But many other forces can fuel outlandish beliefs, says **Herbert Gintis**.

Going to Extremes: How Like Minds Unite and Divide

by Cass R. Sunstein

Oxford University Press: 2009. 208 pp.
\$21.95, £12.99

Law professor Cass Sunstein creatively combines academic scholarship, popular writing and public service. As an adviser to US President Barack Obama, he has recently moved from his position at Harvard Law School to head the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs. His latest book, *Going to Extremes*, examines how social segregation causes people's views to become more exaggerated.

Sunstein's specialism is behavioural decision theory, a field that has demonstrated that beliefs are not formed using rational deliberation alone. In this book, he gathers evidence to show that when like-minded people interact, their views are reinforced and become more extreme. For instance, in one experiment, subjects who identified themselves as 'liberal' or 'conservative' became even more so after being separated into two groups of like-minded individuals to discuss controversial issues such as global warming, abortion and gay marriage.

Sunstein concludes that people tend to seek others with similar ideas, and their interactions give rise to 'group polarization'. His key example is religious terrorism, as perpetrated by young men who spend time together, pray together

and read the same materials. In reinforcing the legitimacy of one another's complaints, they generate an unwarranted justification for their violent intentions and a groundless optimism in their ability to succeed.

Going to Extremes is also a cautionary tale for Obama. His predecessor, George W. Bush, has been widely criticized for failing to supply sufficient troops and equipment to the rebuilding initiative in Iraq following the fall of Saddam Hussein. Bush's failure to act has often been attributed by the Democratic opposition to the similar mindset of his team of advisers, who were hand-picked to work beside defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld. Very soon after Rumsfeld was replaced by Robert Gates in December 2006, Bush's strategy changed. After much consultation, in January 2007 Bush authorized a dramatic increase in troop levels in Iraq.

Sunstein argues that a diversity of advisory opinion is essential to good leadership, to avoid executive policy becoming entrenched irrespective of unfolding events. As a small group of people all committed to one viewpoint, Bush's advisers moved to a position that was more extreme, and less tenable, than any single adviser would have held in isolation.

However, not all collective false beliefs are the product of self-segregation. 'Belief contagion' can lead large numbers of people to accept outlandish notions for which there are no credible evidence. For example, in the

mid-twentieth century, psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim asserted, on the basis of anecdotal evidence, that autism was caused by "refrigerator mothers" — women who treated their children coldly. Widely endorsed at the time but now regarded as erroneous, this runaway belief heralded years of victimization of the mothers of children with autism and misdirected therapeutic efforts.

A more recent example of belief contagion from the late-twentieth century is the preoccupation with 'recovered memories', which are susceptible to suggestion and hence can be easily spread. There have been many cases of teachers, for example, being prosecuted for alleged sexual abuse on the basis of community accusations, backed up with rehearsed child testimony and irregular court proceedings that were shaped by false collective beliefs.

Prejudice is another potent generator of false beliefs. Anti-black sentiments were fuelled in the southern United States after the civil war by self-serving politicians and tabloid newspapers. Under Adolf Hitler, Nazi politicians spread anti-Semitic stories for political reasons, but prejudice rendered these stories plausible.

On reading *Going to Extremes*, one might expect that people are becoming more polarized. But that is not the case. American voters are now more likely to declare themselves Independents, rather than either Democrats or Republicans, than they were a century ago. And in all but four sessions of the US Congress

between 1980 and 2007, the president and the congressional majority have come from different parties. We may feel more polarized today because, especially through the media, we are in daily contact with those with whom we disagree.

Nor should terrorism be thought of as simply the product of group polarization. Terrorism

has long been an effective tactic for non-state actors with political goals, and is supported and funded by large sections of the societies in which they live.

Going to Extremes is a fine book full of insightful evidence and intelligent commentary on modern political life. Sunstein's vision of emancipatory political discourse is salutary,

and the world would probably be a better place if we followed it. But this is only one aspect of how we form beliefs. ■

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Society need not be selfish

The Age of Empathy: Nature's Lessons for a Kinder Society

by Frans de Waal

Random House: 2009. 320 pp. \$25.99

In the 1950s and 1960s, a major topic of research in animal behaviour was aggression. Konrad Lorenz's popular 1966 book, *On Aggression*, argued that it has an important role in the social life of many animal species, including humans. The idea struck a chord with the public — perhaps because the memory of the Second World War was still fresh and the emerging cold war showed that even allies could turn on one another. Lorenz also noted that many animal species had “aggression-inhibiting mechanisms” to keep things from getting out of hand. But he thought that humans were especially under-equipped with these.

In the late 1970s, ethologist Frans de Waal began to study the aggression-inhibiting mechanisms of various primate species, which led to the discovery that primates often reconcile

after fighting. Combatants will seek out one another and display some kind of peacemaking behaviour that often involves touching, as de Waal summarizes in his 1989 book *Peacemaking Among Primates* (Harvard University Press). The phenomenon has turned out to be robust and widespread, even among some non-primate mammals. De Waal has also studied reciprocity in primates: food sharing, support in fights and grooming seem to be exchanged in kind in many species.

Over the past 15 years or so, de Waal has written a series of popular books with the main theme that humans are more similar to other animals in their attitudes and behaviour than most people realize. In particular, he has set out to combat the idea that evolution selects exclusively for individualistically selfish behaviour in animals. He argues that evolution has also selected for conciliation, cooperation and even empathy in many species, most obviously in those who live in complex social groups, which includes most mammals and almost all primates. To the chagrin of many scientists, de Waal's books often weave together seamlessly

systematic research with informal anecdotes of animal behaviour.

In his latest volume, *The Age of Empathy*, de Waal continues these same themes but with more focus on the implications for how we should conduct ourselves and construct our societies. His evidence is drawn from non-human primates, dolphins, elephants and various domesticated animals, including his own pet cat. He also scrutinizes some politicians and popular figures from the point of view of animal behaviour. A repeated foil throughout is Gordon Gekko, from the 1987 movie *Wall Street*, who reiterates in various forms the basic credo that “greed is good”.

As a European living in the United States, de Waal compares a cooperative, collectivist and caring society with one that is more focused on individuals' rights and responsibilities — confessing his own sentiments to lie “somewhere in the middle of the Atlantic”. His main political message is that we should not continue to harp on about evolution justifying only the selfish side of human nature, although of course that exists. He urges that we must also capitalize on the empathetic and cooperative attitudes that evolution has equipped us with, writing: “A society that ignores these tendencies can't be optimal”.

De Waal's latest book does not address fundamental questions about the evolution of cooperation, empathy or altruism, nor how humans evolved exaggerated forms of these to become fully moral agents. But for those who still equate the terms ‘beastly’ and ‘ape-like’ with fundamentally selfish and aggressive behaviour, and who believe that evolution is always “red in tooth and claw”, *The Age of Empathy* is an excellent antidote. Whether this book, or indeed any study of the natural world, also provides concrete lessons for human society is another question. ■

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Dolphins' ability to cooperate, argues Frans de Waal, is evidence that evolution favours altruism.