

Why loneliness fuels populism

As curbs on socialising return, we need to examine the link between isolation and the politics of intolerance

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White hair. Pink nose. Tail. The mouse is three months old. He's been in a cage for four weeks in a period of enforced solitude. But today he will get a visitor.

A new mouse enters his cage, "our" mouse sizes him up — there's "an initial pattern of exploratory activity", as the researchers running this trial will put it. Then suddenly our mouse makes a startling move. He stands on his back legs, rattles his tail and aggressively bites the intruder, wrestling him to the ground.

The ensuing fight — brutal, violent and prompted simply by the introduction of another mouse — is videotaped by the researchers. They have seen this play out before. In almost all cases, the longer a mouse is isolated, the more aggressive it is to the newcomer.

So mice, once isolated, turn on each other. But is this truth about mice true too of men? Could loneliness not only be damaging our mental and physical health but also be making the world a more aggressive, angry place? And if so, what are the implications for a cohesive society and democracy?

With less than six weeks to go until the US presidential election, understanding the relationship between loneliness and the ballot box has never been more urgent.



An attendee at a Trump campaign rally in Michigan this month © Bloomberg

Loneliness will inevitably increase as we head towards a second wave of Covid-19 and the return of many curbs on social interaction. This will impact not just the old, whose feelings of isolation were invoked by Boris Johnson, the UK prime minister, in a speech announcing new coronavirus rules this week. Early studies show that as many as one in four UK adults felt lonely during lockdown, with young people aged 18-29 and low-income workers the loneliest.

It was Hannah Arendt — one of the titans of 20th-century thought — who first wrote about the link between loneliness and the politics of intolerance. A young Jew, Arendt fled Germany in 1933. After the war, she devoted herself to making sense of why it was the country had descended into barbarism. In 1951 she published *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. It's a wide-ranging book, encompassing the rise of anti-Semitism, the role of propaganda, and imperialism's fusion of racism and bureaucracy. But at the end, she turns to what appears to be a surprising factor: loneliness.

Arendt writes that for those characterised by “isolation and lack of normal social relationships . . . it is through surrendering their individual selves to ideology that [they] rediscover their purpose and self-respect”. Loneliness, or “the experience of not belonging to the world at all”, is, Arendt writes, “the essence of totalitarian government . . . the preparation of its executioners and victims”.

While our world today is clearly not that of 1930s Germany, this is a warning from history that we should not ignore. For even before coronavirus struck, loneliness was becoming one of the defining emotions of the 21st century.



American-German philosopher Hannah Arendt, 1946 © Getty Images

Moreover, this is a phenomenon that in recent years has been exploited for political gain by rightwing populist leaders and extremist forces at the democratic margins. It is what connects railroader Terry from east Tennessee, young Parisian baker Eric and small businessman Giorgio in Milan, just some of those whose stories I got to know as I investigated this phenomenon. Each intends to vote for their country’s leading rightwing populist candidate at the next national election. And each of them is lonely.

One in eight Britons admitted in 2019 that they did not have even a single friend they could rely on

Traditional definitions have cast loneliness in terms of the individual, characterising it as feeling bereft of company, love and intimacy or lacking the support of friends. Even before the pandemic, recent surveys had established that, in the US, three in five adults considered themselves lonely, while in Germany two-thirds believed loneliness to be a serious problem. In the UK, where

the situation is so serious that in 2018 a minister for loneliness was appointed, one in eight Britons admitted in 2019 that they did not have even a single friend they could rely on — a rise from one in 10 just five years before.

Our smartphones are clearly part of the problem. Not only because, perma-connected and perma-distracted, we are often physically together yet feel alone, but also because for young people in particular the incessant siren call of social media means ever greater exposure to vitriol and abuse. In the UK, 65 per cent of young people have experienced cyberbullying. It is perhaps no wonder, then, that a series of recent experiments in which students were charged with limiting their social media usage found that this produced a significant reduction in loneliness.

There are other factors. Mass migration to cities has led to swaths of urbanites who don't know their neighbours or feel anchored in their neighbourhoods, while an increasing number of rural dwellers feel isolated because their family and friends' support networks have dispersed or even collapsed.

Then there's what we might think of as the neoliberal mindset: 40 years of seeing ourselves as competitors not collaborators, takers not givers, hustlers not helpers. This was always going to take a societal toll. A recent survey of 46,000 participants across the world found that individualistic societies were considerably lonelier than collectivist ones.

But depicting loneliness solely in terms of how connected we feel to our friends, neighbours and colleagues risks occluding its other potent forms. Loneliness is political as well as personal, economic as well as social. It is also about feeling disconnected from our fellow citizens and political leaders, and detached from our work and our employer.



League leader Matteo Salvini greets his supporters in June in Barletta, Italy © Getty Images



Members of the far-right Flemish separatist party Vlaams Belang react after general, regional and European Parliament elections in Londerzeel, Belgium, last year © Reuters

In a world reshaped by globalisation, automation, austerity and most recently by the coronavirus and ongoing economic downturn, loneliness also encompasses feeling excluded from society's gains, and feeling unsupported, powerless, invisible and voiceless. This combination of personal and political isolation helps to explain not only why levels of loneliness are so high globally today, but also why loneliness and politics have in recent years become so closely linked.

As early as 1992, researchers began to pick up on a correlation between social isolation and votes for the far-right Front National's Jean-Marie Le Pen in France. Across the Atlantic, a 2016 poll by the Center for the Study of Elections and Democracy revealed Donald Trump voters to be significantly more likely to report having fewer close friends, fewer acquaintances and to spend fewer hours a week with both than supporters of either Hillary Clinton or Bernie Sanders.

Similarly, in my conversations with far-right voters across the globe, isolation was a recurring theme. Eric in Paris told me of the loneliness of urban living, and of the joy he derives from his regular Wednesday Rassemblement National (RN, formerly the Front National) gatherings, of afterwards going out for group drinks, of handing out posters and flyers together. He'd checked out other political parties on the road to Le Pen, the populist left included, but found RN's community particularly welcoming.

Giorgio in Milan shared how thankful he is to the League led by Matteo Salvini for the dinners and parties he had started going to: "They're called committees, they're like get-togethers for people in the party. And they're very nice, actually. You can meet a lot of people. We sing, and there's a really strong feeling of tradition."

Think too about the success of Donald Trump's election rallies in 2016 and you can see why he has been so desperate to get them going again for his 2020 campaign. The sea of red-clad folk, sporting matching "Make America Great Again" hats, badges and T-shirts — these are communal events that make people feel part of something bigger. They provide a sense of identity, a kind of kinship that many of his supporters find increasingly hard to get elsewhere.

Salvini uses similar tactics in Italy, invoking intimate words such as “*mamma*”, “*papà*” and “*amici*” (friends). It may be a cynical co-opting of family, but it’s successful. So too are the Belgian festivals sponsored by rightwing populist party Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interest). Here, supporters split their time between anti-immigration speeches indoors and an outside festival that includes face-painting and bouncy castles.

But it’s not just their emphasis on nearly tribal experiences that explains why today’s rightwing populists have proven so successful at appealing to those for whom the traditional bonds of the workplace, religious institutions and the wider community have broken down.

Their success also lies in this: an appeal to the feeling of exclusion and marginalisation that many citizens have come to experience in recent years, a sense of being ignored, even abandoned, by those who hold political and economic power. Think of Trump’s rallying cry that “The forgotten men and women of our country will be forgotten no longer” or Marine Le Pen’s oath to serve “a forgotten France, a France abandoned by the self-appointed elite”. It’s an appeal that lands strongest with those who feel newly forgotten and abandoned.

“The economic system is unfair,” Eric told me. “It’s not enough to work hard, you have to work extra-hard. If you’re good, it’s not enough. You have to be super-good and know the right people — otherwise you won’t earn enough to live.”

Railroad worker Terry felt similarly cast aside. A father of eight from east Tennessee with 20 years’ railroad service, he now found himself living “paycheck to paycheck” instead of the “pretty good life” he was living before. Like many of the railroad workers I heard from, he believed that Trump was listening and would “take care of his people”, while previous political leaders had, in his mind, ignored their needs.

AfD's Björn Höcke greets supporters at a rally in Grimma, Germany, in August © Getty Images

AfD members gather last year at Gillamoos Fair in the Bavarian town of Abensberg, Germany © Reuters

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that in studies of far-right strongholds in France and Germany researchers found “abandonment” to be a recurring theme. The failure of the parties on the mainstream political left, of course, is that in the eyes of many they stopped being seen as the ones who had the interests of the “forgotten” and “abandoned” at heart. Especially working-class communities, often predominantly white.

Loneliness does something else too — it changes how we perceive the world around us. A 2019 study carried out at King’s College London asked 2,000 18-year-olds to describe the friendliness of their neighbourhood. The participants’ siblings, living at the same address, were asked the same question. In short, the lonelier siblings perceived their neighbourhoods as less friendly, less cohesive and less trustworthy than their brother or sister who suffered less from feelings of isolation.

The lonely see the world as a more threatening, hostile place, and rightwing populists have proven particularly adept at exploiting these fears. For alongside their focus on belonging has always been a clear message about who is not invited in. Think, for example, of the thousands of voices chanting “Build the wall” at Trump rallies. Or how at Alternative for Germany (AfD) marches, supporters’ chants of “We are the people” make chillingly clear who the people are and who they are not.

Chants of ‘We are the people’ make chillingly clear who the people are and who they are not

It is here that the manipulation of loneliness and isolation by populists takes on its ugliest and most divisive form. By reinforcing their followers’ sense of abandonment and marginalisation and setting this against an apparent political favouring of people unlike them — typically immigrants and sometimes simply people of a different religion or colour — populists’

fear-mongering revs up emotions, anxiety and insecurity and manipulates ethnic and religious difference to garner allegiance and support.

In 2020, these political leaders added another element to their populist brew. When the pandemic hit, it did not take long for a number of them to use the crisis to further stoke racial, ethnic and religious tensions and to demonise those who are different with a new line of attack: life was better before those foreigners infected you with a deadly virus.

League supporter Giorgio in Italy had evidently absorbed these messages of antagonistic tribalism. “The government has been putting its own citizens in second place after the immigrants that are coming from Africa,” he told me, “people who come here and have a vacation while a lot of native Italians are working in the fields with no social rights.”

Trump-supporting Terry from East Tennessee, meanwhile, railed against “people who shouldn’t be here, who are taking benefits and finances and jobs away from people here who fought for our country. We need to take care of our own people.”

Like coronavirus conspiracy theories, these are not the facts. Eighty per cent of those who work in Italian fields without social rights are immigrants; in the US, veterans are eligible for far more benefits than refugees. But for those who feel abandoned, alone and ignored, for those who no longer feel bound either to fellow citizens or the state, for those who are already more prone to seeing their environments as frightening and hostile and are more likely to be receptive to conspiracy-like theories (as recent research has established those who feel socially excluded or ostracised are), such narratives have proved very attractive.

Recent analysis of more than 30,000 people recruited as part of the European Social Survey (an intensive questionnaire used by many social scientists) found that those who expressed the most extreme anti-immigrant views were distinguished not by their basic demographics — age, race, occupation — but instead by financial insecurity, low levels of trust in their fellow citizens and government and, importantly, social isolation.

It is true that across the globe in recent months, some rightwing populists have been having a bad time, the AfD in Germany most notably. But we would be unwise to think that their influence as a cadre is on a precipitous decline. The conditions in which they have thrived have not fundamentally changed. Indeed, the pandemic has if anything intensified social dislocation and isolation, and in many places exacerbated divides. Loneliness and the ballot box are therefore likely to remain closely intertwined.

In 2016, Trump made the lonely feel seen and heard, speaking directly to their fears and sense of abandonment, while claiming that he alone understood and cared for them. In his 2020 campaign he is doubling down on this strategy: “We are one national family,” he declared at the Republican National Convention last month, “and we will always protect, love and care for each other.” But he also warned that “everything we have achieved is now endangered” — by outsiders, by crime, by “fake news”.

It’s a strategy designed to provoke the lonely mouse to lash out. If Joe Biden proves unable to effectively counter this narrative and connect to America’s lonely — particularly in its heartlands, where loneliness is especially pronounced — the winner in November may well be the man the lonely have chosen to crown.

Noreena Hertz’s ‘The Lonely Century: Coming Together in a World That’s Pulling Apart’ is published this month by Sceptre

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