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SARAH BALDWIN: From the Watson Institute at Brown University, this is Trending Globally. I'm Sarah Baldwin. We've looked at the rise of populism from a lot of angles on this show. Economic, political, cultural. But Watson professor Rose McDermott brought one to our attention we haven't really looked at before, the biological angle.

It goes something like this. From the growth of cities to the Industrial Revolution to the rise of globalization, human societies have transformed profoundly since our days as hunter gatherers. But our brains, not so much. As Rose explains, this mismatch between how our brains are wired and the way we actually live in the 21st century has all sorts of negative effects-- on individuals and on society.

We go through a lot of examples in our discussion. But we spent most of our time on how this mismatch affects our politics. Specifically, how populist movements on the right and the left play perfectly to our most primal instincts. And the results, as we're seeing, can be disastrous. Here's Rose.

ROSE
MCDERMOTT: So I think in many ways, a lot of populism is driven by an underlying drive for tribal behavior. In other words, you want to be with your group, your crew, your tribe. And that involves a lot of what's known as, you know, in-group solidarity. Meaning you want to help your friends and your family and your kin.

But outgroup discrimination, meaning you want to make sure that resources stay with your people, and that they don't go to the other group. And that the other group can't take advantage of you, or take things that you believe belong to you.

And so I think right now there's a couple of things going on. One is a world of resource deprivation. There's more people, there's fewer resources. Those resources are getting restricted by things like climate change, where you have more droughts, more food scarcity, more hot areas of the world where people are moving to other areas. And there aren't as-- they aren't perceived to be as many resources in those areas. And so people get very insular and protective of their resources.

And they see, in some ways, a shrinking planet, shrinking resources. And they want to make sure that they get theirs. And not at the-- you know, they don't want the expense-- at the

expense of the other side.

SARAH BALDWIN: Which explains, in part, fierce anti-immigration sentiment, resource scarcity.

ROSE
MCDERMOTT: Absolutely. So part of it is definitely what happens in the real world. The other part is, I think, that this stuff can be manipulated by leaders. And when leaders use fear and anger to manipulate their populations, they can move a lot of fence sitters-- people who aren't sure which side of the equation they're on-- to support them.

And the benefit to the leader then, is he has a larger coalition. He has a larger group of supporters, by saying, if you don't join with me, those guys out there are going to come and get you. They're going to hurt you. They're going to take your stuff. They're going to otherwise take advantage of you.

And effective leaders can use emotion to manipulate their followers to join with them against the outgroup. And so I think both those things are going on simultaneously around the world. And it's not just the United States, right? Like you see it with Viktor Orban in Hungary. You see it with Bolsonaro in Brazil, Duterte in the Philippines. I mean it's a phenomenon around the world. Of which Trump is a part but by no means the exclusive manifestation of this phenomenon.

SARAH BALDWIN: You write that inflammatory rhetoric actually triggers neural mechanisms. So our brains are-- something happens in our brains that makes us respond to that.

ROSE
MCDERMOTT: So there's a lot of recent work that's been done using MRI technology and so on to look at the way various kinds of information get processed in the brain. And emotions like fear and anger get processed through a part of the brain called the amygdala. And it's a very old, evolutionary part of the brain.

And it helped to survive, right? I mean if you see a bear coming toward you, you need to be scared and to run away. And that's how we survived. We survived from people who privileged emotion over slow, rational thought. And that was very adaptive in our past. Because we needed to respond to genuine threats, whether those threats were predators, like animals, other people, environmental things, fires, floods, you know, things like that.

But it means that emotions-- the way that the pathways work in the brain is that certain emotions, they just happen faster in the brain than the slow, deliberate part of the brain that

happens in your prefrontal cortex, where you think about things in slow, deliberate conscious ways. Daniel Kahneman has written in his book, "Thinking Fast and Slow," where he talks about type 1 and type 2 processing. It's sort of like that.

So we have a bunch of stuff we do automatically without thinking that's almost like an instinct. And fear and anger work that way, because it's helped us survive. To protect ourselves, to defend ourselves. But sort of cost benefit analysis where we do these consumer reports, and we think through a ton of data. And we come up with the best solution, like, yeah, that's rational. But it takes a long time, and it's effortful. It takes a lot of effort.

And a lot of people aren't interested in doing that. A lot of people aren't able to do it. But everybody is able to process fear. If you can't process fear, you die. And so, you know, that happens. And the problem is it can get triggered now by the kinds of things that historically would not necessarily have been relevant.

But we're in these very large scale societies now, and we still get triggered as though it was the lion or the bear coming after us. And so the way that leaders can manipulate us now may not be as adaptive as it was in the past, like running away from a bear.

SARAH BALDWIN: But then, how do you explain that plenty of people don't become-- revert to tribal-- or do we all, and we just don't know it?

ROSE
MCDERMOTT: I think it depends on the situation. But I think a lot of it is a function of education. So the more educated you become, the more you're more likely to engage the slower, more effortful processing when contemplating complex decision making. And you know, there are differences by intellectual capacity, differences by political ideology. I mean there's other kinds of individual differences.

At root, though, I think everybody is capable of tribalism. Everybody is capable of privileging their children over a stranger. Although you have unbelievable examples of cooperation. This guy yesterday who caught babies that were thrown out of the balcony in Philadelphia.

So some guy was in a fire. He just started throwing his babies out the door. And some stranger who happened to be a former fireman caught them, right? And it was all over the news, because in catching them, he totally dissed some really famous football player who had missed catching other things. Like, well, I could catch a baby, why couldn't you catch this pass?

So it's amazing when we think about the human capacity for cooperation across strangers as well, because that's not something you see in the animal kingdom. Even among higher primates, right? That's what distinguishes humans, is our capacity for cooperation. But there's a flip side, which is our capacity for incredible conflict and violence as well. Chimps have that too. But humans are unique in their ability to use mechanized warfare.

SARAH BALDWIN: I was very interested to see chimpanzees included in your discussion of this. And also I love the line that Trump's ability to channel primal dominance. And I think that was in a discussion that's very related to this, of that when people are in a fear situation, they're susceptible to what appears to be a strong leader. They want to be led.

ROSE
MCDERMOTT: And in fact that's a really old argument. Erich Fromm wrote a great book 50 years or more ago now, called *Escape from Freedom*, which was his attempt to grapple with why people followed Hitler. And in essence, he said, you know when things are bad, especially economic deprivation, but other kinds, a social deprivation as well, you actually are willing to give up unlimited amounts of freedom in order to have order. And to have a powerful leader, who can tell you what to do, and who promises protection. And who promises order in society.

And I think when people are feeling threatened, they want somebody who promises, rightly or wrongly, to be able to restore a particular kind of predictability and a particular kind of security. Because that's what we all want, right, is security. But it depends on what kind and how.

But leaders who offer that can often get a lot of followers, especially among those who feel economically deprived or social-- like having lost some part of their social status. And that can have lots of forms. Not just economic.

It can be racial. It can be sexual. It can be religious. There's all kinds of ways that we can divide up our traits. And I think the desire for hierarchy and dominance is stronger in some people than in others. But is also pretty universal. You see it in every society.

SARAH BALDWIN: Can we stay with that idea of a desire for stability? Because you are also cited in a recent piece in the Times that was talking about President Trump in particular. How he seems to sow chaos. So is there-- is that a behavior of these leaders, who they sort of-- or to portray the years, the Obama years, say, as having broken things. Is that a thing? Like to sow chaos, or to evoke chaos, and then appear, so that you appear to be the savior?

ROSE Well, I think Trump does that a lot, right? He induces uncertainty and anxiety. And then says, I

MCDERMOTT: have the solution. Except he's the one who sowed the anxiety and uncertainty. And so I don't know that that's a particular dynamic. But it's something that he seems to have mastered, and he seems to thrive on chaos.

And that is different from the way that, you know, let's say Hitler tried to rule. With sort of, I can come in and I can save you. But I'm not going to save you with chaos. I'm going to save you with incredible order and predictability, and a particular kind of hierarchy.

ROSE For someone who's not an evolutionary psychologist, help me understand how this doesn't

MCDERMOTT: necessarily mean that we're hardwired to just become in-group friendly and outgroup discriminatory. And you know, sort of behave based on fear and loathing of other.

ROSE Well, I'll say a couple of things. One is, I think, that Leda Cosmides, who's kind of the mother

MCDERMOTT: of evolutionary psychology. And she's at the University of California, Santa Barbara, has this great phrase with her husband, John Tooby, who's there as well, about how evolutionary psychology is really about how the modern mind lives in a Stone Age skull.

So we have these minds that are capable of developing all kinds of really sophisticated technology and infrastructure and resources. But our basic psychology has changed remarkably little across the millennia. And there's certain things that we really care about. We really care about how we orchestrate sex and reproduction. Who's going to have kids. When they have it. Whether or not they're married.

And you know the manifestation of that can change over time. In 18th century England it can look like an objection to pornography and prostitution. But in 21st century America, it looks like a fight over transgender bathrooms. Those are different topics.

SARAH BALDWIN: Or women's reproductive rights.

ROSE Or women-- or abortion. Those may appear to be different topics. But they're all about who

MCDERMOTT: gets to decide who reproduces and when and how. Resource allocation. So think about that can look like tax policy. That can look like welfare.

But basically it's who gets what. So I killed the meat, and I bring it home. And do I just give it to my family, or do I share it with the broader community? And who gets to decide that. And finally, these issues of, ingroup protection and outgroup discrimination.

It can look like immigration. It can also look like decisions to go to war. And those kinds of

things have been with us forever, right? Universal time. And our ancestors who responded adaptively and flexibly to those challenges produced us, right? Over time.

And I think the challenge and the criticism that comes of evolutionary psychology is like, well, OK, you know, if it's always been that way, doesn't mean it works right now. And that's true. We could have developed a taste for sweet foods back in the day, when the sweetest thing you could find was a wild blackberry.

And now that you can eat bags of Reese's peanut butter chips, you know, it doesn't work for our diabetic propensity in quite the same way. But the problem is, I think a lot of people who don't like biological or genetic notions, think that they are the only thing that matters. That you can't change biology, and you can't change genetics.

But environments are malleable. Environments are really easy to change. And in fact, the exact opposite is true. Think about changing a low-income housing project. How easy is that? It's really, really, really hard. You have buildings. You have infrastructure. You have entire cultures that are built around poverty that are really, really, really hard to change.

So environments can be very challenging to change. But biology, by definition, the way that we developed is all our genetics require environmental input. We're phenomenally responsive to what happens in the environment.

That's, in fact, what triggers genetic expression constantly. And our biology changes constantly. So, you know, your microbiome can change completely in three days, based on what you eat. There isn't a cell in your body that was alive 80 days ago.

So you know the 90-day thing with AA has a real biological reality. Because if you haven't had alcohol in 90 days, there's no cell in your body that remembers having alcohol. Your mind remembers having alcohol. But the biological reality is different. It doesn't mean it's easy to quit drinking or drugs or whatever. But your biology by definition has to be flexible and responsive to the environment.

If you're not flexible and responsive to the environment, that's what illness is, right? That's what, you know, if you respond the exact same way to every situation, that's what schizophrenia is. That's what a really serious illness is. But healthy people respond differently to different environments. And that input is essential to our genetic expression. So in reality, biology in many ways is much more responsive, immediately responsive, and much more

flexible and adaptable than a lot of environments that are entrenched across generations.

SARAH BALDWIN: So if policymakers and politicians were to read this paper in which you encourage us to pause and look backwards before going forward, what does the going forward look like? If I'm a policymaker, and I read, oh, OK, now I have a more evolutionary-based understanding of the rise of populism, what's the prescription for proposing something that's more pro social, and say, appealing?

ROSE I think you have a couple answers to the question. The first is to say that one of the things
MCDERMOTT: that's helpful is to think about developing and changing institutions to be more consistently aligned with the way human psychology actually works.

SARAH BALDWIN: And what would that look like?

ROSE Things that aren't so large and bloated. Things that seem more human and responsive and
MCDERMOTT: are more aligned with our goals, rather than bureaucratic rationality and incrementalism. I think technology works against human psychology in many ways.

How many times have you called up and gotten a machine, and you find yourself yelling at press 1, press 2.

SARAH BALDWIN: Way too many times.

ROSE It just doesn't-- you know, it's not. And to the extent that we replace technology. So you know,
MCDERMOTT: people who spend hours a day on Facebook or Twitter or whatever, you can see it directly in your relationship between how much time you spend on those things and rates of depression and anxiety, particularly in adolescent girls. Right?

So if you look at rising rates of, say, depression, anxiety and suicide in adolescence, it's almost linear from the introduction of the iPhone in 2007. Jean Twenge has pretty amazing statistics on this. How do you overcome it?

Well, Cliff Nass did some really interesting studies showing you have dinner with your kids, where you turn down the phone and you have eye-to-eye contact and a conversation. And 15 minutes a day is enough to overcome it. So you're thinking, there's tons of people out there not even having 15 minutes a day of face-to-face interaction. That's not human psychology. I mean, technology is new.

SARAH BALDWIN: You talk about isolation too, and we all know what that can do.

ROSE Right. Isolation, loneliness turns out to be a way greater risk factor now for cardiovascular

MCDERMOTT: illness than smoking.

SARAH BALDWIN: But also violence.

ROSE Violence. Incredible. I mean, look at the whole involuntary celibate movement that's caused all

MCDERMOTT: these mass shootings. And so, technology can be a great resource, but it's also counter to millennia of human interaction. And so to the extent that you're alienating people from each other, because we're social animals, you're inducing a kind of artificially induced isolation and loneliness that causes violence, that causes illness, that causes all kinds of mental illnesses as well.

So you have those kinds of challenges and those kinds of problems that are associated with it. The other thing about aligning more with, you know, what is-- it's not just institutions. I think that it's also which values we're trying to perpetuate. So when you say, what would a counter to populism look like?

I think it looks like egalitarianism, right? Like you look at hunter gatherer, hunter horticulturalist populations. You do not have the incredible wealth inequality that you see around places in the Bay Area or in New York City or whatever, where you have billionaires with huge amounts of stuff and space. And then, you know, many people living in one room without very many resources.

So when you think about something that would be a counter to populism, you're thinking about a system where there's less inequality in the distribution of resources. And not just material resources. Status resources. Do you value a teacher and a nurse and, you know, a janitor and a child-care worker and an elder-care worker the same way that you value a football player and a rock star, in terms, not just of monetary remuneration, but also like how much do you value them.

You know, how many people know the names of the janitors where they work? You know, think about establishing social relationships that are more egalitarian in status as well as in money.

SARAH BALDWIN: That's fascinating. And I hope that a lot of politicians are listening. But I want to go back to something that seems contradictory to me. And I hope you can explain it. You said this very

interesting thing that one way would be for institutions to be more aligned with human psychology and less bloated and bureaucratic.

And I know how important cooperation is going to be if we are going to solve really big urgent problems, like climate change. So on the one hand, I see these global problems that are going to require global cooperation. Because it doesn't matter if Finland's emissions go down.

ROSE Pretty low already.

MCDERMOTT:

SARAH BALDWIN: So this global cooperation need doesn't seem aligned with what you're saying about sort of bringing things into smaller human scale. So how does that work?

ROSE I think that's the critical role of leadership. So leadership facilitates coordination and

MCDERMOTT: cooperation. But there can be good leaders, and there can be bad leaders. And there can be effective leaders, and there can be ineffective leaders.

And truly effective leaders are, in many ways, egalitarian. They serve their constituency. They don't have their constituency serve them. And when you are an effective leader, and one who serves their constituency, rather than exploiting the constituency for your own private gain, then you can help coordinate and facilitate cooperation across other large groups of people.

And like, for example, with climate change, which I think is, you know, the most critical threatening problem at the moment. It's very hard to imagine a successful world coalition that will be effective without major coordinating activity on the part of the United States. For all kinds of logistical and financial reasons.

And so other states don't have a motive to join if they think everybody else is defecting. They're only going to join if they think the big players are going to cooperate. And you have to signal that cooperation. And that takes committed leadership.

The kind of leadership you saw in that young woman, 16 years old in front of the UN. And how did she do it? She did it with emotion. She was angry. She was-- she was really upset. And that's what galvanized the people.

Now obviously it didn't galvanize them enough to actually take action. But it got a lot of media, right? And there were, what, four million people who showed up at the climate strike on Friday? Young people, right? That's what effective leadership looks like.

Because you don't look at her and say, oh, she's in it for the money. She's in it for the fame. In fact, she's criticizing people who are doing that, right? And so she's saying, I don't care what you're doing, I'm going to do this whether or not you do this. And it's way easier to marshal an army when you stand up in front than when you hide in the back

SARAH BALDWIN: Well, as usual, Rose, you have given us a lot to think about. And think about in new ways. And I'm so grateful. Thank you so much for coming in today.

ROSE Thank you very much, Sarah. I really appreciate it. I always enjoy talking to you.

MCDERMOTT:

SARAH BALDWIN: Well, come back soon.

ROSE OK.

MCDERMOTT:

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SARAH BALDWIN: This episode of Trending Globally was produced by Dan Richards and Babette Thomas. Our theme music is by Henry Bloomfield. I'm Sarah Baldwin. You can subscribe to us on iTunes, Stitcher or your favorite podcast app.

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