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Comment

How *should* the political animals of the 21st century *feel*?
Comment on “The sense of should: A biologically-based framework
for modelling social pressure” by J.E. Theriault et al.

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In their seminal article, Theriault, Young and Feldman Barrett [1] put forward a wide-ranging model that accounts for a fundamental building block of our sociality, namely the felt sense that we must conform to other people's expectations, what they aptly call ‘the sense of should’. Their basic premise is that the sense that we *should* behave in a certain way so as to conform to other people's expectations is an important subdivision of normative influences. The authors are right in saying that our world is largely social and that as social beings we strive to make the social environment more predictable so as to regulate the metabolic costs. And we do so by inferring others' expectations and conforming to them. Towards the end of their article, the authors point to ways in which their model can be applied to wider societal phenomena and behaviours, from the status quo bias and communication to behavioural economics and the evolutionary and cultural history of norms. However, their ambitious scope leaves out an important phenomenon that has emerged from our very social nature and that is geared towards the very notion of predictability of our social lives: *politics*.

The reason why I raise the potential links between the sense of should and politics is because politics, in these first decades of the 21st century, have become (again) visceral. There is a growing consensus that liberal democracies are in crisis. The narrative that surrounds this crisis often points to the role that social passions play in the public sphere and political arena [2]. Whether one calls our era the time of anxiety [3], of fear [4] or of anger [5], visceral states, feelings and emotions are at the forefront of the political behaviour of citizens and policy makers alike, acting as drivers as well as targets of politics [6]. While we all experience uncertainty and polarization, for some of us they provoke anxiety, while for others they rather provoke anger or fear. How can we explain the existence and pervasiveness of such *nervous states* [3] amongst citizens and our elected politicians, and what is their influence on our political behaviour?

To answer these questions, I offer the concept of *visceral politics* that lies at the intersection of the body's physiology, experienced emotion, and political behaviour to highlights the complex byways of how the physiological (e.g. metabolic), emotive nature of our engagement with the social world shapes our decisions, and how socio-political

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forces recruit physiology and emotions to influence our behaviour. The emphasis on the metabolic needs of biological organisms as the main imperative behind the sense of should seems highly relevant for understanding the relation between citizens and politics, their reciprocal expectations.

Aristotle defined humans as political animals; we can only flourish *qua naturally rational* creatures within the polis. As he wrote in *Politics* “*Human beings are by nature political animals [. . .] The city-state is naturally prior to the individuals, because individuals cannot perform their natural functions apart from the city-state, since they are not self-sufficient.*” Our nature is to live in a *polis*, whose natural function, according to Aristotle, is to enable us to live a “good life”. The different ways of organizing the life of the *polis* exist so that people can live well. With the hindsight of 21st science, we could say that in its most basic form, a ‘good life’ would be one that is metabolically well-regulated. How well people succeed in achieving this goal, Aristotle suggested, depends on the type of politics we, the political animals, choose.

One can argue that one of the key aims of 20th century politics has been to create a more or less certain world for the people, to put in place the right conditions for the bodies and minds of the populace to, firstly, remain within a ‘margin of safety’ (e.g. homeostasis) and, secondly, to socially regulate our behaviour so that we can correctly infer how the social world makes us feel and how we should act (e.g. allostasis). Our current neuroscientific understanding of how emotions are made [7] implies that central to the understanding of how we feel and conform are the underpinning visceral states, our body-budget and the interoceptive inferences we make thereof.

But the political animals of 21st-century western democracies seem evermore allostatically overloaded. We find ourselves in a social world of increased existential uncertainty, as concerns about healthcare provisions and financial stability consistently rank among our highest stressors,¹ not to mention the most recent COVID-19 pandemic. Our world is also one of increased informational uncertainty, driven by an ecosystem of informational overdose relying on pervasive social media that breed fake news [8] and belief polarization [9]. It is against this background, that we are asked to infer our affective needs as they come to dominate socio-political behaviour. How *should* we feel vis-à-vis the politics of our times?

We increasingly live in bodies that feel unsafe. With depleted body-budgets, our ability to infer feeling states and regulate emotions may be hindered, making us susceptible to externally-driven construction of our emotions. An affective label (“you are angry/afraid”) provided by an exogenous source, and even more so by a politically powerful source, gives some context to our potentially unidentified or dys-regulated physiological states and may “construct” the conscious experience of that particular emotion. In other words, it shapes the *social* inference of our emotions and its political consequences, that is, how we *should* behave. Take President Trump saying in a recent political rally “The American people are fed up with Democrat lies, hoaxes, smears, slanders, and scams. The Democrats’ shameful conduct, has created an angry majority, and that’s what we are, we’re a majority and we’re angry” (Monroe, Louisiana, November 6, 2019). Different parts of the populace, given their political and ideological attitudes, are exposed to different labels of affect – and this to the extent that an emotional prescription (such as ‘you should feel. . .’) and affect-labelling (such as ‘anger’) can function as the context within which people will construct their emotions. Given the distinctive effects that different emotions may have on political behaviour, such top-down social processes of affect-labelling can influence affect-generation and may explain the emotional microclimates of different social groups and how their behaviour conforms to the expectations of political leaders, parties and institutions. And if that is the case, then in what sense one can say that conforming to such expectations is adaptive -and for whom- regardless of its content?

Therefore, the socio-political context is crucial for the inferences that we make about how our politicians and political systems expect us to behave, for the very *sense of should*. The idea of visceral politics put forward here places our physiological integrity and its mentalization at the centre of what politics is for: to create a more or less certain world for our ‘worlded’ bodies [10], so that we are capable of inferring correctly how the social world expect us and makes us feel, but also to be equipped with the right physiological and mental resources to allostatically deal with uncertainty. The sense of should seems to be at the core of this attempt to give a new answer to an age-old question: what does it mean to be a political animal, and in particular to be one in the 21st century of emotive politics and populism, ‘alternative facts’, increasing inequality, and precarious health?

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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