*Eleven*

# Us Versus Them

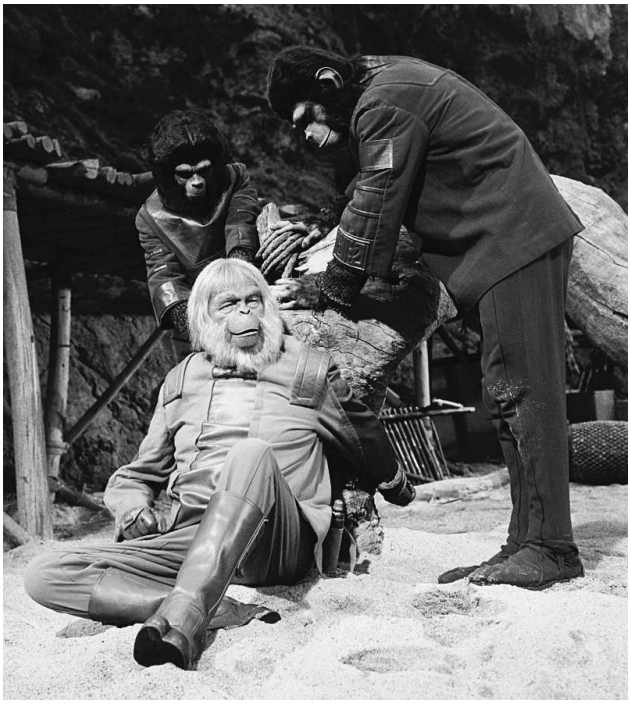
As a kid, I saw the original 1968 version of *Planet of the Apes*. As a future primatologist, I was mesmerized, saw it repeatedly, and loved the cheesy ape costumes.

Years later I discovered a great anecdote about the filming of the movie, related by both Charlton Heston and Kim Hunter, its stars: at lunchtime, the people playing chimps and those playing gorillas ate in separate groups.[1]

As it's been said (most often attributed to Robert Benchley), "There are two kinds of people in the world: those who divide the world into two kinds of people and those who don't." There are more of the first. And it is vastly consequential when people are divided into Us and Them, in-group and out-group, "the people" (i.e., our kind) and the Others.

This chapter explores our tendency to form Us/Them dichotomies and to favor the former. Is this mind-set universal? How malleable are "Us" and "Them" categories? Is there hope that human clannishness and xenophobia can be vanquished so that Hollywood-extra chimps and gorillas break bread together?

# THE STRENGTH OF US/THEM



Our brains form Us/Them dichotomies (henceforth, "Us/Them-ing," for brevity) with stunning speed.[2] As discussed in chapter 3, fifty-millisecond exposure to the face of someone of another race activates the amygdala, while failing to activate the fusiform face area as much as same-race faces do—all within a few hundred milliseconds. Similarly, the brain groups faces by gender or social status at roughly the same speed.

Rapid, automatic biases against a Them can be demonstrated with the fiendishly clever Implicit Association Test (IAT).[3]

Suppose you are unconsciously prejudiced against trolls. To simplify the IAT enormously: A computer screen flashes either pictures of humans or trolls or words with positive connotations (e.g., "honest") or negative ones ("deceitful"). Sometimes the rule is "If you see a human or a positive term, press the red button; if it's a troll or a negative term, press the blue button." And sometimes it's "Human or negative term, press red; troll or positive term, press blue." Because of your antitroll bias, pairing a troll with a positive term, or a human with a negative, is discordant and slightly distracting. Thus you pause for a few milliseconds before pressing a button.

It's automatic—you're not fuming about clannish troll business practices or troll brutality in the Battle of Somewhere in 1523. You're processing words and pictures, and unconsciously you pause, stopped by the dissonance linking troll and "lovely," or human and "malodorous." Run enough rounds and that pattern of delay emerges, revealing your bias.

The brain's fault lines dividing Us from Them were shown in chapter 4's discussion of oxytocin. Recall how the hormone prompts trust, generosity, and cooperation toward Us but crappier behavior toward Them—more preemptive aggression in economic play, more advocacy of sacrificing Them (but not Us) for the greater good. Oxytocin exaggerates Us/Them-ing.

This is hugely interesting. If you like broccoli but spurn cauliflower, no hormone amplifies both preferences. Ditto for liking chess and disdaining backgammon. Oxytocin's opposing effects on Us and Them demonstrate the salience of such dichotomizing.

Our depth of Us/Them-ing is supported further by something remarkable—other species do it as well. Initially this doesn't seem profound. After all, chimps kill males from other groups, baboon troops bristle when encountering each other, animals of all stripes tense at strangers.

This simply reflects not taking kindly to someone new, a Them. But some other species have a broader concept of Us and Them.[4] For example, chimp groups that have swollen in number might divide; murderous animosities soon emerge between ex-groupmates. Remarkably, you can show automatic Us/Them-ing in other primates with a monkey equivalent of the IAT. In one study animals were shown pictures of either members of their own or the neighboring group, interspersed with positive things (e.g., fruit) or negative (e.g., spiders). And monkeys looked longer at discordant pairings (e.g., group members with spiders). These monkeys don't just fight neighbors over resources. They have negative associations with them—"Those guys are like yucky spiders, but us, *us*, we're like luscious tropical fruit."*

Numerous experiments confirm that the brain differentially processes images within milliseconds based on minimal cues about race or gender.[5] Similarly, consider "minimal group" paradigms, pioneered in the 1970s by Henri Tajfel of the University of Bristol. He showed that even if groupings are based on flimsy differences (e.g., whether someone over- or underestimated the number of dots in a picture), in-group biases, such as higher levels of cooperation, still soon develop. Such prosociality is about group identification—people preferentially allocate resources to anonymous in-group individuals.

Merely grouping people activates parochial biases, no matter how tenuous the basis of the grouping. In general, minimal group paradigms enhance our opinion of Us rather than lessening our opinion of Them. I guess that's meager good news—at least we resist thinking that people who came up heads on the coin toss (in contrast to our admirable tails) eat their dead.

The power of minimal, arbitrary groupings to elicit Us/Them-ing recalls "green-beard effects" from chapter 10. Recall how these hover between prosociality due to kin selection and due to reciprocal altruism—they require an arbitrary, conspicuous, genetically based trait (e.g., a green beard) that indicates a tendency to act altruistically toward other green-bearders—under those conditions, green-bearders flourish.

Us/Them-ing based on minimal shared traits is like psychological rather than genetic green-beard effects. We feel positive associations with people who share the most meaningless traits with us.

As a great example, in one study subjects conversed with a researcher who, unbeknownst to them, did or didn't mimic their movements (for example, leg crossing).[6] Not only is mimicry pleasing, activating mesolimbic dopamine, but it also made subjects more likely to help the researcher, picking up their dropped pen. An unconscious Us-ness born from someone slouching in a chair like you do.

Thus an invisible strategy becomes yoked to an arbitrary green-beard marker. What helps define a particular culture? Values, beliefs, attributions, ideologies. All invisible, until they are yoked with arbitrary markers such as dress, ornamentation, or regional accent. Consider two value-laden approaches to what to do to a cow: (A) eat it; (B) worship it. Two As or two Bs would be more peaceful when sorting out cow options than an A and B together. What might reliably mark someone who uses approach A? Maybe a Stetson and cowboy boots. And a B person? Perhaps a sari or a Nehru jacket. Those markers were initially arbitrary—nothing about the object called a sari intrinsically suggests a belief that cows are sacred because a god tends them. And there's no inevitable link between carnivory and a Stetson's shape—it keeps the sun out of your eyes and off your neck, useful whether you tend cows because you love steak or because Lord Krishna tended cows. Minimal group studies show our propensity for generating biased Us/Thems from arbitrary differences. What we then do is link arbitrary markers to meaningful differences in values and beliefs.

And then something happens with those arbitrary markers. We (e.g., primates, rats, Pavlov's dogs) can be conditioned to associate something arbitrary, like a bell, with a reward.[7] As the association solidifies, is the ringing bell still "just" a marker symbolizing impending pleasure, or does it become pleasurable itself? Elegant work related to the mesolimbic dopamine system shows that in a substantial subset of rats, the arbitrary signal itself becomes rewarding. Similarly, an arbitrary symbol of an Us core value gradually takes on

a life and power of its own, becoming the signified instead of the signifier. Thus, for example, the scattering of colors and patterns on cloth that constitutes a nation's flag becomes something that people will kill and die for.*

The strength of Us/Them-ing is shown by its emergence in kids. By age three to four, kids already group people by race and gender, have more negative views of such Thems, and perceive other-race faces as being angrier than same-race faces.[8]

And even earlier. Infants learn same-race faces better than other-race. (How can you tell? Show an infant a picture of someone repeatedly; she looks at it less each time. Now show a different face—if she can't tell the two apart, she barely glances at it. But if it's recognized as being new, there's excitement, and longer looking).[9]

Four important thoughts about kids dichotomizing:

- Are children learning these prejudices from their parents? Not necessarily. Kids grow in environments whose nonrandom stimuli tacitly pave the way for dichotomizing. If an infant sees faces of only one skin color, the salient thing about the first face with a different skin color will be the skin color.
- Racial dichotomies are formed during a crucial developmental period. As evidence, children adopted before age eight by someone of a different race develop the expertise at face recognition of the adoptive parent's race.[10]
- Kids learn dichotomies in the absence of any ill intent. When a kindergarten teacher says, "Good morning, boys and girls," the kids are being taught that dividing the world that way is more meaningful than saying, "Good morning, those of you who have lost a tooth and those of you who haven't yet." It's everywhere, from "she" and "he" meaning different things to those languages so taken with gender dichotomizing that inanimate objects are given honorary gonads.*[11]
- Racial Us/Them-ing can seem indelibly entrenched in kids because the parents most intent on preventing it are often lousy at it. As shown in studies, liberals are typically uncomfortable discussing race with their children. Instead they counter the lure of Us/Them-ing with abstractions that mean squat to kids—"It's

wonderful that everyone can be friends" or "Barney is purple, and we love Barney."

Thus, the strength of Us/Them-ing is shown by: (a) the speed and minimal sensory stimuli required for the brain to process group differences; (b) the unconscious automaticity of such processes; (c) its presence in other primates and very young humans; and (d) the tendency to group according to arbitrary differences, and to then imbue those markers with power.

# US

Us/Them-ing typically involves inflating the merits of Us concerning core values—we are more correct, wise, moral, and worthy when it comes to knowing what the gods want/running the economy/raising kids/fighting this war. Us-ness also involves inflating the merits of our arbitrary markers, and that can take some work—rationalizing why our food is tastier, our music more moving, our language more logical or poetic.

Perhaps even more than superiority, feelings about Us center on shared obligations, on willingness and expectation of mutuality.[12] The essence of an Us mind-set is nonrandom clustering producing higher-than-expected frequencies of positive interactions. As we saw in chapter 10, the logical strategy in one-round Prisoner's Dilemma is to defect. Cooperation flourishes when games have an uncertain number of rounds, and with the capacity for our reputations to precede us. Groups, by definition, have multiple-round games and the means to spread news of someone being a jerk.

This sense of obligation and reciprocity among Us is shown in economic games, where players are more trusting, generous, and cooperative with in-group than with out-group members (even with minimal group paradigms, where players know that groupings are arbitrary).[13] Chimps even show this trust element where they have to choose between (a) being guaranteed to receive some unexciting food and (b) getting some fabulous food if another chimp will share it with them. Chimps opt for the second scenario, requiring trust, when the other chimp is a grooming partner.

Moreover, priming people to think of a victim of violence as an Us, rather than a Them, increases the odds of their intervening. And recall from chapter 3 how fans at a soccer match are more likely to aid an injured spectator if he's wearing home-team insignias.[14]

Enhanced prosociality for in-group members does not even require face-to-face interactions. In one study subjects from an ethnically polarized neighborhood encountered an open, stamped questionnaire on the sidewalk near a mailbox. Subjects were more likely to mail it if the questionnaire indicated support for a value of the subject's ethnic group.[15]

In-group obligation is shown by people feeling more need to make amends for transgressions against an Us than against a Them. For the former, people usually make amends to the wronged individual and act more prosocially to the group overall. But people often make in-group amends by being more antisocial to another group. Moreover, in such scenarios, the guiltier the person feels about her in-group violation, the worse she is to Thems.[16]

Thus, sometimes you help Us by directly helping Us, sometimes by hurting Them. This raises a broad issue about in-group parochialism: is the goal that your group do well, or simply better than Them? If the former, maximizing absolute levels of in-group well-being is the goal, and the levels of rewards to Them is irrelevant; if the latter, the goal is maximizing the gap between Us and Them.

Both occur. Doing better rather than doing well makes sense in zero-sum games where, say, only one team can win, and where winning with scores of 1–0, 10–0, and 10–9 are equivalent. Moreover, for sectarian sports fans, there is similar mesolimbic dopamine activation when the home team wins or when a hated rival loses to a third party.*[17] This is schadenfreude, gloating, where their pain is your gain.

It's problematic when non–zero sum games are viewed as zero-sum (winner-take-all).[18] It's not a great mind-set to think you've won World War III if afterward Us have two mud huts and three fire sticks and They have only one of each.* A horrific version of this thinking occurred late during World War I, when the Allies knew they had more resources (i.e., soldiers) than Germany. Therefore, the British commander, Douglas Haig, declared a strategy of "ceaseless attrition," where Britain went on the offensive, no matter how many of his men were killed—as long as the Germans lost at least as many.

So in-group parochialism is often more concerned about Us beating Them than with Us simply doing well. This is the essence of tolerating inequality in the name of loyalty. Consistent with that, priming loyalty strengthens in-group favoritism and identification, while priming equality does the opposite.[19]

Intertwined with in-group loyalty and favoritism is an enhanced capacity for empathy. For example, the amygdala activates when viewing fearful faces, but only of group members; when it's an out-group member, Them showing fear might even be good news—if it scares Them, bring it on. Moreover, recall from chapter 3 the "isomorphic sensorimotor" reflex of tensing your hand when watching a hand being poked with a needle; the reflex is stronger if it is a same-race hand.[20]

As we saw, people are more likely to make amends for transgressions against Us than against Them. What about responses to other in-group members violating a norm?

Most common is forgiving Us more readily than Them. As we will see, this is often rationalized—we screw up because of special circumstances; They screw up because that's how They are.

Something interesting can happen when someone's transgression constitutes airing the group's dirty laundry that affirms a negative stereotype. The resulting in-group shame can provoke high levels of punishment as a signal to outsiders.[21]

The United States, with its rationalizations and ambivalences about ethnicity, provides many such examples. Consider Rudy Giuliani, who grew up in Brooklyn in an Italian American enclave dominated by organized crime (Giuliani's father served time for armed robbery and then worked for his brother-in-law, a Mob loan shark). Giuliani rose to national prominence in 1985 as the attorney prosecuting the "Five Families" in the Mafia Commission Trial, effectively destroying them. He was strongly motivated to counter the stereotype of "Italian American" as synonymous with organized crime. When referring to his accomplishment, he said, "And if that's not enough to remove the Mafia prejudice, then there probably could not be anything you could do to remove it." If you want someone to prosecute mafiosi with tireless intensity, get a proud Italian American outraged by the stereotypes generated by the Mob.[22]

Similar motivations were widely ascribed to Chris Darden, the African American attorney who was cocounsel for the prosecution in the O. J. Simpson trial. Ditto for the trial of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg and Morton Sobell, all Jewish, accused of spying for the Soviet Union. The very public prosecution was by two Jews, Roy Cohn and Irving Saypol, and presided over by a Jewish judge, Irving Kaufman, all eager to counter the stereotype of Jews as disloyal "internationalists." After death sentences were doled out, Kaufman was honored by the American Jewish Committee, the Anti-Defamation League, and the Jewish War Veterans.*[23] Giuliani, Darden, Cohn, Saypol, and Kaufman show that being in a group means that someone else's behaviors can make you look bad.*[24]

This raises a larger issue, namely our sense of obligation and loyalty to Us as a whole. At one extreme it can be contractual. This can be literal, with professional athletes in team sports. It is expected that when jocks sign contracts, they will play their hardest, putting the team's fortune above showboating. But the obligations are finite—they're not expected to sacrifice their lives for their

team. And when athletes are traded, they don't serve as a fifth column, throwing games in their new uniform to benefit their old team. The core of such a contractual relationship is the fungibility of both employer and employee.

At the other extreme, of course, are Us memberships that are not fungible and transcend negotiation. People aren't traded from the Shiites to the Sunnis, or from the Iraqi Kurds to the Sami herders in Finland. It would be a rare Kurd who would want to be Sami, and his ancestors would likely turn over in their graves when he nuzzled his first reindeer. Converts are often subject to ferocious retribution by those they left—consider Meriam Ibrahim, sentenced to death in Sudan in 2014 for converting to Christianity—and suspicion from those they've joined. With the sense of one's lot being permanent come distinctive elements of Us-ness. You don't sign a faith-based baseball contract with vague promises of a salary. But Us-ness based on sacred values, with wholes bigger than sums of parts, where unenforceable obligations stretch across generations, millennia, even into afterlives, where it's Us, right or wrong, is the essence of faith-based relationships.

Naturally, things are more complicated. Sometimes an athlete choosing to switch teams is viewed as betraying a sacred trust. Consider the perceived treachery when LeBron James chose to leave the Cavaliers of his hometown, Cleveland, and the perception of his choice to return as akin to the Second Coming. At the other extreme of group membership, people do convert, emigrate, assimilate, and, especially in the United States, wind up a pretty atypical Us—consider ex-Governor Bobby Jindal of Louisiana, with his rich Southern accent and Christian faith, born Piyush Jindal to Hindu immigrant parents from India. And consider the complexities in, to use a horrible phrase, the unidirectionality of fungibility—Muslim fundamentalists who would execute Meriam Ibrahim while advocating forced conversions *to* Islam at the point of a sword.

The nature of group membership can be bloodily contentious concerning people's relationship to the state. Is it contractual? The people pay taxes, obey laws, serve in the army; the government provides social services, builds roads, and helps after hurricanes. Or is it one of sacred values? The people give absolute obedience and the state provides the myths of the Fatherland. Few such citizens can conceive that if the stork had arbitrarily deposited them elsewhere, they'd fervently feel the innate rightness of a different brand of exceptionalism, goose-stepping to different martial music.

# THOSE THEMS

Just as we view Us in standardized ways, there are patterns in how we view Them. A consistent one is viewing Them as threatening, angry, and untrustworthy. Take space aliens in movies, as an interesting example. In an analysis of nearly a hundred pertinent movies, starting with Georges Méliès's pioneering 1902 *A Trip to the Moon*, nearly 80 percent present aliens as malevolent, with the remainder either benevolent or neutral.* In economic games people implicitly treat members of other races as less trustworthy or reciprocating. Whites judge African American faces as angrier than white faces, and racially ambiguous faces with angry expressions are more likely to be categorized as the other race. White subjects become more likely to support juvenile criminals being tried as adults when primed to think about black (versus white) offenders. And the unconscious sense of Them as menacing can be remarkably abstract—baseball fans tend to underestimate the distance to a rival team's stadium, while Americans hostile to Mexican immigrants underestimate the distance to Mexico City.

But Thems do not solely evoke a sense of menace; sometimes it's disgust. Back to the insular cortex, which in most animals is about gustatory disgust—biting into rotten food—but whose human portfolio includes moral and aesthetic disgust. Pictures of drug addicts or the homeless typically activate the insula, not the amygdala.[25]

Being disgusted by another group's abstract beliefs isn't naturally the role of the insula, which evolved to care about disgusting tastes and smells. Us/Them markers provide a stepping-stone. Feeling disgusted by Them because they eat repulsive, sacred, or adorable things, slather themselves with rancid scents, dress in scandalous ways—these are things the insula can sink its teeth into. In the words of the psychologist Paul Rozin of the University of Pennsylvania, "Disgust serves as an ethnic or out-group marker." Establishing that They eat disgusting things provides momentum for deciding that They also have disgusting ideas about, say, deontological ethics.[26]

The role of disgust in Them-ing explains some individual differences in its magnitude. Specifically, people with the strongest negative attitudes toward

immigrants, foreigners, and socially deviant groups tend to have low thresholds for interpersonal disgust (e.g., are resistant to wearing a stranger's clothes or sitting in a warm seat just vacated).[27] We will return to this finding in chapter 15.

Some Thems are ridiculous, i.e., subject to ridicule and mockery, humor as hostility.[28] Out-groups mocking the in-group is a weapon of the weak, damaging the mighty and lessening the sting of subordination. When an in-group mocks an out-group, it's to solidify negative stereotypes and reify the hierarchy. In line with this, individuals with a high "social dominance orientation" (acceptance of hierarchy and group inequality) are most likely to enjoy jokes about out-groups.

Thems are also frequently viewed as simpler and more homogeneous than Us, with simpler emotions and less sensitivity to pain. David Berreby, in his superb book *Us and Them: The Science of Identity*, gives a striking example, namely that whether it was ancient Rome, medieval England, imperial China, or the antebellum South, the elite had the system-justifying stereotype of slaves as simple, childlike, and incapable of independence.[29]

Essentialism is all about viewing Them as homogeneous and interchangeable, the idea that while we are individuals, they have a monolithic, immutable, icky essence. A long history of bad relations with Thems fuels essentialist thinking—"They've always been like this and always will be." As does having few personal interactions with Thems—after all, the more interactions with Thems, the more exceptions accumulate that challenge essentialist stereotyping. But infrequency of interactions is not required, as evidenced by essentialist thinking about the opposite sex.[30]

Thus, Thems come in different flavors—threatening and angry, disgusting and repellent, primitive and undifferentiated.

### *Thoughts Versus Feelings About Them*

How much are our thoughts about Them post-hoc rationalizations for our feelings about Them? Back to interactions between cognition and affect.

Us/Them-ing is readily framed cognitively. John Jost of NYU has explored one domain of this, namely the cognitive cartwheels of those on top to justify the existing system's unequal status quo. Cognitive gymnastics also occur when our negative, homogeneous view of a type of Them must accommodate the appealing celebrity Them, the Them neighbor, the Them who has saved our ass

—"Ah, *this* Them is different" (no doubt followed by a self-congratulatory sense of open-mindedness).[31]

Cognitive subtlety can be needed in viewing Thems as threats.[32] Being afraid that the Them approaching you will rob you is rife with affect and particularism. But fearing that those Thems will take our jobs, manipulate the banks, dilute our bloodlines, make our children gay, etc., requires future-oriented cognition about economics, sociology, political science, and pseudoscience.

Thus Us/Them-ing can arise from cognitive capacities to generalize, imagine the future, infer hidden motivations, and use language to align these cognitions with other Us-es. As we saw, other primates not only kill individuals because they are Thems but have negative associations about them as well. Nonetheless, no other primate kills over ideology, theology, or aesthetics.

Despite the importance of thought in Us/Them-ing, its core is emotional and automatic.[33] In the words of Berreby in his book, "Stereotyping isn't a case of lazy, short-cutting cognition. It isn't conscious cognition at all." Such automaticity generates statements like "I can't put my finger on why, but it's just wrong when They do that." Work by Jonathan Haidt of NYU shows that in such circumstances, cognitions are post-hoc justifications for feelings and intuitions, to convince yourself that you have indeed rationally put your finger on why.

The automaticity of Us/Them-ing is shown by the speed of the amygdala and insula in making such dichotomies—the brain weighing in affectively precedes conscious awareness, or there never is conscious awareness, as with subliminal stimuli. Another measure of the affective core of Them-ing is when no one even knows the basis of a prejudice. Consider the Cagots, a minority in France whose persecution began in the eleventh century and continued well into the last one.[34] Cagots were required to live outside villages, dress distinctively, sit separately in church, and do menial jobs. Yet they didn't differ in appearance, religion, accent, or names, and no one knows why they were pariahs. They may have descended from Moorish soldiers in the Islamic invasion of Spain and thus were discriminated against by Christians. Or they might have been early Christians, and discrimination against them was started by *non*-Christians. No one knew the sins of ancestral Cagots or how to recognize Cagots beyond community knowledge. During the French Revolution, Cagots burned birth certificates in government offices to destroy proof of their status.

The automaticity is seen in another way. Consider an individual with an impassioned hatred for an array of out-groups.[35] There are two ways to explain this. Option 1: He has carefully concluded that group A's trade policies hurt the

economy *and* just happens to also believe that group B's ancestors were blasphemous, *and* thinks that group C members don't express sufficient contrition for a war started by their grandparents, *and* perceives group D members as pushy, *and* thinks that group E undermines family values. That's a lot of cognitive just-happens-to's. Option 2: The guy's authoritarian temperament is unsettled by novelty and ambiguity about hierarchies; this isn't a set of coherent cognitions. As we saw in chapter 7, Theodor Adorno, in trying to understand the roots of fascism, formalized this authoritarian temperament. Individuals prejudiced against one type of out-group tend toward being prejudiced against other ones, and for affective reasons.*[36] More on this in the next chapter.

The strongest evidence that abrasive Them-ing originates in emotions and automatic processes is that supposed rational cognitions about Thems can be unconsciously manipulated. In an example cited earlier, subjects unconsciously primed about "loyalty" sit closer to Us-es and farther from Thems, while those primed about "equality" do the opposite.* In another study, subjects watched a slide show of basic, unexciting information about a country they knew nothing about ("There's a country called 'Moldova'?"). For half the subjects, faces with positive expressions were flashed at subliminal speeds between slides; for the other half, it was negative expressions. The former developed more positive views of the country than the latter.[37]

Conscious judgments about Thems are unconsciously manipulated in the real world. In an important experiment discussed in chapter 3, morning commuters at train stations in predominantly white suburbs filled out questionnaires about political views. Then, at half the stations, a pair of young Mexicans, conservatively dressed, appeared each morning for two weeks, chatting quietly in Spanish before boarding the train. Then commuters filled out second questionnaires.

Remarkably, the presence of such pairs made people more supportive of decreasing *legal* immigration from Mexico and of making English the official language, and more opposed to amnesty for illegal immigrants. The manipulation was selective, not changing attitudes about Asian Americans, African Americans, or Middle Easterners.

How's this for a fascinating influence on Us/Them-ing, way below the level of awareness: Chapter 4 noted that when women are ovulating, their fusiform face areas respond more to faces, with the ("emotional") vmPFCs responding more to men's faces in particular. Carlos Navarrete at Michigan State University

has shown that white women, when ovulating, have more negative attitudes toward African American men.*[38] Thus the intensity of Us/Them-ing is being modulated by hormones. Our feelings about Thems can be shaped by subterranean forces we haven't a clue about.

Automatic features of Us/Them-ing can extend to magical contagion, a belief that the essentialism of people can transfer to objects or other organisms.[39] This can be a plus or a minus—one study showed that washing a sweater worn by JFK would decrease its value at auction, whereas sterilizing one worn by Bernie Madoff would increase its value. This is sheer irrationality—it's not like an unwashed JFK sweater still contains his magical armpit essence, while an unwashed Madoff sweater swarms with moral-taint cooties. And magical contagion has occurred elsewhere—Nazis killed supposedly contaminated "Jewish dogs" along with their owners.*[40]

The heart of cognition catching up with affect is, of course, rationalization. A great example of this occurred in 2000, when everyone learned the phrase "hanging chads" following the election of Al Gore and the Supreme Court's selection of George W. Bush.* For those who missed that fun, a chad is the piece of paper knocked out of a punch-card ballot when someone votes, and a hanging chad is one that doesn't completely detach; does this justify disqualifying the vote, even though it is clear who the person voted for? And obviously, if one millisecond before chads reared their hanging heads, you had asked pundits what would be the hanging-chad stances of the party of Reagan and trickle-down economics, and the party of FDR and the Great Society, they wouldn't have had a clue. And yet there we were, one millisecond postchads, with each party passionately explaining why the view of the opposing Thems threatened Mom, apple pie, and the legacy of the Alamo.

The "confirmation biases" used to rationalize and justify automatic Them-ing are numerous—remembering supportive better than opposing evidence; testing things in ways that can support but not negate your hypothesis; skeptically probing outcomes you don't like more than ones you do.

Moreover, manipulating implicit Them-ing alters justification processes. In one study Scottish students read about a game where Scottish participants either did or didn't treat English participants unfairly. Students who read about Scots being prejudicial became more positive in their stereotypes about Scots and more negative about Brits—justifying the bias by the Scottish participants.[41]

Our cognitions run to catch up with our affective selves, searching for the minute factoid or plausible fabrication that explains why we hate Them.[42]

### *Individual Intergroup Interactions Versus Group Intergroup Interactions*

Thus, we tend to think of Us as noble, loyal, and composed of distinctive individuals whose failings are due to circumstance. Thems, in contrast, seem disgusting, ridiculous, simple, homogeneous, undifferentiated, and interchangeable. All frequently backed up by rationalizations for our intuitions.

That is a picture of an individual navigating Us/Them in his mind. Interactions between *groups* tend to be more competitive and aggressive than are interactions between individual Us-es and Thems. In the words of Reinhold Niebuhr, writing during World War II, "The group is more arrogant, hypocritical, self-centered and more ruthless in the pursuit of its ends than the individual."[43]

There is often an inverse relationship between levels of intragroup and intergroup aggression. In other words, groups with highly hostile interactions with neighbors tend to have minimal internal conflict. Or, to spin this another way, groups with high levels of internal conflict are too distracted to focus hostility on the Others.[44]

Crucially, is that inverse relationship causal? Must a society be internally peaceful to muster the large-scale cooperation needed for major intergroup hostilities? Must a society suppress homicide to accomplish genocide? Or to reverse the causality, do threats from Thems make societies more internally cooperative? This is a view advanced by the economist Samuel Bowles of the Santa Fe Institute who has framed this as "Conflict: Altruism's Midwife."[45] Stay tuned.

# UNIQUE REALMS OF HUMAN US/THEM-ING

Despite other primates displaying rudimentary abstractions of Us/Them-ing, humans are in a stratosphere of uniqueness. In this section I consider how:

- we all belong to multiple categories of Us, and their relative importance can rapidly change;
- all Thems are not the same, and we have complex taxonomies about different types of Thems and the responses they evoke;
- we can feel badly about Us/Them-ing and try to conceal it;
- cultural mechanisms can sharpen or soften the edges of our dichotomizing.

## *Multiple Us-es*

I am a vertebrate, mammal, primate, ape, human, male, scientist, lefty, sun sneezer, *Breaking Bad* obsessive, and Green Bay Packers fan.* All grounds for concocting an Us/Them. Crucially, which Us is most important to me constantly shifts—if some octopus moved in next door, I would feel hostile superiority because I have a spine and it didn't, but that animosity might melt into a sense of kinship when I discovered that the octopus, like me, loved playing Twister as a kid.

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We all belong to multiple Us/Them dichotomies. Sometimes one can be a surrogate for another—for example, the dichotomy of people who are/aren't knowledgeable about caviar is a good stand-in for a dichotomy about socioeconomic status.

As noted, the most important thing about our membership in multiple Us/Thems is the ease with which their prioritizing shifts. A famed example, discussed in chapter 3, concerned math performance in Asian American women, built around the stereotypes of Asians being good at math, and women not. Half the subjects were primed to think of themselves as Asian before a math test; their

scores improved. Half were primed about gender; scores declined. Moreover, levels of activity in cortical regions involved in math skills changed in parallel.*[46]

We also recognize that other individuals belong to multiple categories, and shift which we consider most relevant. Not surprisingly, lots of that literature concerns race, with the core question being whether it is an Us/Them that trumps all others.

The primacy of race has a lot of folk-intuition appeal. First, race is a biological attribute, a conspicuous fixed identity that readily prompts essentialist thinking.[47] This also fuels intuitions about evolution—humans evolved under conditions where different skin color is the clearest signal that someone is a distant Them. And the salience of race is seen cross-culturally—an astonishing percentage of cultures have historically made status distinctions by skin color, including in traditional cultures before Western contact, where with few exceptions (e.g., the low-status Ainu ethnic minority in Japan) lighter skin tone confers higher status both within and between groups.

But these intuitions are flimsy. First, while there are obvious biological contributions to racial differences, "race" is a biological continuum rather than a discrete category—for example, unless you cherry-pick the data, genetic variation within race is generally as great as between races. And this really is no surprise when looking at the range of variation with a racial rubric—compare Sicilians with Swedes or a Senegalese farmer with an Ethiopian herder.*

The evolutionary argument doesn't hold up either. Racial differences, which have only relatively recently emerged, are of little Us/Them significance. For the hunter-gatherers of our hominin history, the most different person you'd ever encounter in your life came from perhaps a couple of dozen miles away, while the nearest person of a different race lived thousands of miles away—there is no evolutionary legacy of humans encountering people of markedly different skin color.

Furthermore, the notion of race as a fixed, biologically based classification system doesn't work either. At various times in the history of the U.S. census, "Mexican" and "Armenian" were classified as distinctive races; southern Italians were of a different race from northern Europeans; someone with one black great-grandparent and seven white ones was classified as white in Oregon but not Florida. This is race as a cultural rather than biological construct.[48]

Given facts like these, it is not surprising that racial Us/Them dichotomies are frequently trumped by other classifications. The most frequent is gender.

Recall the finding that it is more difficult to "extinguish" a conditioned fear association with an other- than a same-race face. Navarrete has shown that this occurs only when the conditioned faces are male; gender outweighs race as an automatic classification in this case.* Age as a classification readily trumps race as well. Even occupation can—for example, in one study white subjects showed an automatic preference for white politicians over black athletes when they were primed to think of race, but the opposite when primed to think of occupation.[49]

Race as a salient Us/Them category can be shoved aside by subtle reclassification. In one study subjects saw pictures of individuals, each black or white, each associated with a statement, and then had to recall which face went with which statement.[50] There was automatic racial categorization—if subjects misattributed a quote, the face picked and the one actually associated with the statement were likely to be of the same race. Next, half the black and half the white individuals pictured wore the same distinctive yellow shirt; the other half wore gray. Now subjects most often confused faces by shirt color.

Wonderful research by Mary Wheeler and Susan Fiske of Princeton showed how categorization is shifted, studying the phenomenon of amygdala activation by pictures of other-race faces.[51] In one group subjects tried to find a distinctive dot in each picture. An other-race face didn't activate the amygdala; face-ness wasn't being processed. In a second group subjects judged whether each face looked older than some age. Amygdaloid responses to other-race faces enlarged —thinking categorically about age strengthened thinking categorically about race. In a third group a vegetable was displayed before each face; subjects judged whether the person liked that vegetable. The amygdala didn't respond to other-race faces.

At least two interpretations come to mind to explain this last result:

a. Distraction. Subjects were too busy thinking about, say, carrots to do automatic categorization by race. This would resemble the effect of searching for the dot.
b. Recategorization. You look at a Them face, thinking about what food they'd like. You picture the person shopping, ordering a meal in a restaurant, sitting down to dinner at home and enjoying a particular food. . . . In other words, you think of the person as an individual. This is the readily accepted interpretation.

But recategorization can occur in the real world under the most brutal and unlikely circumstances. Here are examples that I find to be intensely poignant:

In the Battle of Gettysburg, Confederate general Lewis Armistead was mortally wounded while leading a charge. As he lay on the battlefield, he gave a secret Masonic sign, in hopes of its being recognized by a fellow Mason. It was, by a Union officer, Hiram Bingham, who protected him, got him to a Union field hospital, and guarded his personal effects. In an instant the Us/Them of Union/Confederate became less important than that of Mason/non-Mason.*[52]

Another shifting of Thems also occurred during the Civil War. Both armies were filled with Irish immigrant soldiers; Irish typically had picked sides haphazardly, joining what they thought would be a short conflict to gain some military training—useful for returning home to fight for Irish independence. Before battle, Irish soldiers put identifying sprigs of green in their hats, so that, should they lie dead or dying, they'd shed the arbitrary Us/Them of this American war and revert to the Us that mattered—to be recognized and aided by their fellow Irish.[53] A green sprig as a green beard.

Rapid shifting of Us/Them dichotomies is seen during World War II, when British commandos kidnapped German general Heinrich Kreipe in Crete, followed by a dangerous eighteen-day march to the coast to rendezvous with a British ship. One day the party saw the snows of Crete's highest peak. Kreipe mumbled to himself the first line (in Latin) of an ode by Horace about a snowcapped mountain. At which point the British commander, Patrick Leigh Fermor, continued the recitation. The two men realized that they had, in Leigh Fermor's words, "drunk at the same fountains." A recategorization. Leigh Fermor had Kreipe's wounds treated and personally ensured his safety through the remainder of the march. The two stayed in touch after the war and were reunited decades later on Greek television. "No hard feelings," said Kreipe, praising Leigh Fermor's "daring operation."[54]

> And finally there is the World War I Christmas truce, something I will consider at length in the final chapter. This is the famed event where soldiers on both sides spent the day singing, praying, and partying together, playing soccer, and exchanging gifts, and soldiers up and down the lines struggled to extend the truce. It took all of one day for British-versus-German to be subordinated to something more important—*all* of us in the trenches versus the officers in the rear who want us to go back to killing each other.

Thus Us/Them dichotomies can wither away into being historical trivia questions like the Cagots and can have their boundaries shifted at the whims of a census. Most important, we have multiple dichotomies in our heads, and ones that seem inevitable and crucial can, under the right circumstances, have their importance evaporate in an instant.

### *Cold and/or Incompetent*

That both a gibbering schizophrenic homeless man and a successful businessman from a resented ethnic group can be a Them demonstrates something crucial—different types of Thems evoke different feelings in us, anchored in differences in the neurobiologies of fear and disgust.[55] As but one example, fear-evoking faces cause us to watch vigilantly and activate the visual cortex; disgust-evoking faces do the opposite.

We carry various taxonomies in our heads as to our relationships with different types of Others. Thinking about some Thems is simple. Consider someone who pushes all our judgmental buttons—say, a homeless junkie whose wife threw him out of the house because of his abusiveness, and who now mugs elderly people. Throw 'im under a trolley—people are most likely to agree to sacrifice one to save five when the five are in-group members and the one is this extreme of an out-group.*[56]

But what about Thems who evoke more complex feelings? Tremendously influential work has been done by Fiske, with her "stereotype content model."[57] This entire section concerns that work.

We tend to categorize Thems along two axes: "warmth" (is the individual or group a friend or foe, benevolent or malevolent?) and "competence" (how effectively can the individual or group carry out their intentions?).

The axes are independent. Ask subjects to assess someone about whom they have only minimal information. Priming them with cues about the person's status alters ratings of competence but not of warmth. Prime them about the person's competitiveness and you do the opposite. These two axes produce a matrix with four corners. There are groups that we rate as being high in both warmth and competence—Us, naturally. And Americans typically view this group as containing good Christians, African American professionals, and the middle class.

And there's the other extreme, low in both warmth and competence—our homeless, addicted mugger. Subjects typically hand out low-warmth/low-competence assessments for the homeless, people on welfare, and poor people of any race.

Then there's the high-warmth/low-competence categorization—the mentally disabled, people with handicaps, the elderly.* And the categorization of low warmth/high competence. It's how people in the developing world tend to view the European culture that used to rule them,* and how many minority Americans view whites. It's the hostile stereotype of Asian Americans by white America, of Jews in Europe, of Indo-Pakistanis in East Africa, of Lebanese in West Africa, and of ethnic Chinese in Indonesia (and, to a lesser extent, of rich people by poorer people everywhere). And it's the same derogation—they're cold, greedy, cleverly devious, clannish, don't assimilate,* have loyalties elsewhere—but, dang, they sure know how to make money, and you probably should go to one who is a doctor if you have something serious.

People tend toward consistent feelings evoked by each of the extremes. For high warmth, high competence (i.e., Us), there's pride. Low warmth, high competence—envy. High warmth, low competence—pity. Low warmth, low competence—disgust. Stick someone in a brain scanner, show them pictures of low-warmth/low-competence people, and there's activation of the amygdala and insula but not of the fusiform face area or the (emotional) vmPFC—a profile evoked by viewing disgusting objects (although, once again, this pattern shifts if you get subjects to individuate, asking them to think about what food this homeless person likes, rather than "anything they can find in garbage cans").* In contrast, viewing low-warmth/high-competence or high-warmth/low-competence individuals activates the vmPFC.

The places between the extremes evoke their own characteristic responses. Individuals who evoke a reaction between pity and pride evoke a desire to help them. Floating between pity and disgust is a desire to exclude and demean.

Between pride and envy is a desire to associate, to derive benefits from. And between envy and disgust are our most hostile urges to attack.

What fascinates me is when someone's categorization changes. The most straightforward ones concern shifts from high-warmth/high-competence (HH) status:

HH to HL: This is watching a parent decline into dementia, a situation evoking extremes of poignant protectiveness.

HH to LH: This is the business partner who turns out to have been embezzling for decades. Betrayal.

And the rare transition from HH to LL—a buddy who made partner in your law firm, but then "something happened" and now he's homeless. Disgust mingled with bafflement—what went wrong?

Equally interesting are shifts from other categorizations. There's when you shift your perception of someone from HL to LL—the janitor whom you condescendingly greet each day turns out to think you're a jerk. Ingrate.

There's the shift from LL to LH. When I was a kid in the sixties, the parochial American view of Japan was LL—the shadow of World War II generating dislike and contempt—"Made in Japan" was about cheap plastic gewgaws. And then, suddenly, "Made in Japan" meant outcompeting American car and steel manufacturers. Whoa. A sense of alarm, of being caught napping at your post.

Then there's the shift from LL to HL. This is when a homeless guy finds someone's wallet and does cartwheels to return it—and you realize that he's more decent than half your friends.

Most interesting to me is the transition from LH status to LL, which invokes gloating, glee, schadenfreude. I remember a great example of this in the 1970s, when Nigeria nationalized its oil industry and there was the (delusionally misplaced, it turns out) belief that this would usher in wealth and stability. I recall a Nigerian commentator crowing that within the decade, Nigeria would be sending foreign aid to its ex–colonial overlord, Great Britain (i.e., Brits would be shifting from LH to LL).

The glee explains a feature of persecution of LH out-groups, namely to first degrade and humiliate them to LL. During China's Cultural Revolution, resented elites were first paraded in dunce caps before being shipped to labor camps. Nazis eliminated the mentally ill, already LL, by unceremoniously murdering them; in contrast, premurder treatment of the LH Jews involved forcing them to wear degrading yellow armbands, to cut one another's beards, to scrub sidewalks

with toothbrushes before jeering crowds. When Idi Amin expelled tens of thousands of LH Indo-Pakistani citizens from Uganda, he first invited his army to rob, beat, and rape them. Turning LH Thems into LL Thems accounts for some of the worst human savagery.

These variations are sure more complicated than chimps associating rivals with spiders.

One strange human domain is the phenomenon of developing a grudging respect, even a sense of camaraderie, with an enemy. This is the world of the probably-apocryphal mutual respect between opposing World War I flying aces: "Ah, monsieur, if it were another time, I would delight in discussing aeronautics with you over some good wine." "Baron, it is an honor that it is you who shoots me out of the sky."

This one's easy to understand—these were knights, dueling to the gallant death, their Us-ness being their shared mastery of the new art of aerial combat, soaring above the little people below.

But surprisingly, the same is shown by combatants who, instead of soaring, were cannon fodder, faceless cogs in their nation's war machine. In the words of a British infantry grunt serving in the bloodbath of trench warfare in World War I, "At home one abuses the enemy, and draws insulting caricatures. How tired I am of grotesque Kaisers. Out here, one can respect a brave, skillful, and resourceful enemy. They have people they love at home, they too have to endure mud, rain and steel." Whispers of Us-ness with people trying to kill you.[58]

And then there is the even stranger world of differing feelings about the economic versus the cultural enemy, the relatively new enemy versus the ancient one, or the distant alien enemy versus the neighboring enemy whose miniscule differences have been inflated. These are the differing subjugations that the British Empire inflicted on the Irish next door versus on Australian aborigines. Or Ho Chi Minh, rejecting the offer of Chinese troops on the ground during the Vietnam War, with a statement to the effect of "The Americans will leave in a year or a decade, but the Chinese will stay for a thousand years if we let them in." And what's most pertinent about byzantine Iranian geopolitics—the millennia-old Persian antipathy toward the Mesopotamians next door, the centuries-old Shiite conflicts with Sunnis, or the decades-old Islamic hatred of the Great Satan, the West?*

No discussion of the oddities of human Us/Them-ing is complete without the phenomenon of the self-hating _____ (take your pick of the out-group), where out-group members buy into the negative stereotypes and develop

favoritism for the in-group.[59] This was shown by psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark in their famed “doll studies,” begun in the 1940s. They demonstrated with shocking clarity that African American children, along with white children, preferred to play with white dolls over black ones, ascribing more positive attributes (e.g., nice, pretty) to them. That this effect was most pronounced in black kids in segregated schools was cited in *Brown v. Board of Education*.[*] Roughly 40 to 50 percent of African Americans, gays and lesbians, and women show automatic IAT biases in favor of whites, heterosexuals, and men, respectively.

### *Some of My Best Friends*

The “honorable enemy” phenomenon raises another domain of human peculiarity. Even if he could, no chimp would ever deny that the neighboring chimps remind him of spiders. None would feel bad about it, urge others to overcome that tendency, teach their children to never call one of those neighboring chimps a “spider.” None would proclaim that he can’t distinguish between Us chimps and Them chimps. And these are all commonplace in progressive Western cultures.

Young humans are like chimps—six-year-olds not only prefer to be with kids like themselves (by whatever criteria) but readily say so. It isn’t until around age ten that kids learn that some feelings and thoughts about Thems are expressed only at home, that communication about Us/Them is charged and contextual.[60]

Thus there can be striking discrepancies in Us/Them relations between what people claim they believe and how they act—consider differences between election poll results and election results. This is shown experimentally as well—in one depressing study, subjects claimed they’d be very likely to proactively confront someone expressing racist views; yet actual rates were far lower when they were unknowingly put in that position (note—this is not to say that this reflected racist sentiments; instead it likely reflected social-norm inhibitions being stronger than the subjects’ principles).[61]

Attempts to control and repress Us/Them antipathies have the frontal cortex written all over them. As we saw, a subliminal fifty-millisecond exposure to the face of another can activate the amygdala, and if exposure is long enough for conscious detection (about five hundred milliseconds or more), the initial amygdala activation is followed by PFC activation and amygdala damping; the

more PFC activation, particularly of the "cognitive" dlPFC, the more amygdala silencing. It's the PFC regulating discomfiting emotions.[62]

Behavioral data also implicate the frontal cortex. For example, for the same degree of implicit racial prejudice (as shown with the IAT), the bias is more likely to be expressed behaviorally in individuals with poor frontal executive control (as shown with an abstract cognitive task).[63]

Chapter 2 introduced the concept of "cognitive load," where a taxing frontal executive task diminishes performance on a subsequent frontal task. This occurs with Us/Them-ing. White subjects do better on certain behavior tests when the tester is white as opposed to black; subjects whose performance declines most dramatically in the latter scenario show the greatest dlPFC activation when viewing other-race faces.[64]

The cognitive load generated by frontal executive control during interracial interactions can be modulated. If white subjects are told, "Most people are more prejudiced than they think they are," before taking the test with a black tester, performance plummets more than if they are told, "Most people perform worse [on a frontal cortical cognitive test] than they think they did." Moreover, if white subjects are primed with a command reeking of frontal regulation ("avoid prejudice" during an interracial interaction), performance declines more than when they are told to "have a positive intercultural exchange."[65]

A different type of executive control can occur in minority Thems when dealing with individuals of the dominant culture—be certain to interact with them in a positive manner, to counter their assumed prejudice against you. In one startling study African American subjects were primed to think about either racial or age prejudice, followed by an interaction with someone white.[66] When the prime was racial, subjects became more talkative, solicited the other person's opinion more, smiled more, and leaned forward more; the same didn't occur when subjects interacted with another African American. Think about chapter 3's African American grad student intentionally whistling Vivaldi each evening on the way home.

Two points are worth making about these studies about executive control and interactions with Thems:

> Frontal cortical activation during an interracial interaction could reflect: (a) being prejudiced and trying to hide it; (b) being prejudiced and feeling bad about it; (c) feeling no prejudice and working to

communicate that; (d) who knows what else. Activation merely implies that the interracial nature of the interaction is weighing on the subject (implicitly or otherwise) and prompting executive control.

As per usual, subjects in these studies were mostly university students fulfilling some Psych 101 requirement. In other words, individuals of an age associated with openness to novelty, residing in a privileged place where Us/Them cultural and economic differences are less than in society at large, and where there is not only institutionalized celebration of diversity but also some actual diversity (beyond the university's home page with the obligatory picture of smiling, conventionally good-looking students of all races and ethnicities peering in microscopes plus, for good measure, a cheerleader type fawning over a nerdy guy in a wheelchair). That even this population demonstrates more implicit antipathy to Thems than they like to admit is pretty depressing.

# MANIPULATING THE EXTENT OF US/THEM-ING

What situations lessen or exacerbate Us/Them-ing? (I define "lessen" as decreased antipathy toward Thems and/or decreased perception of the size or importance of contrasts between Us and Them. Here are some brief summaries, a warm-up for the final two chapters.

## *The Subterranean Forces of Cuing and Priming*

Subliminally flash a picture of a hostile and/or aggressive face, and people are subsequently more likely to perceive a Them as the same (an effect that does not occur in-group).[67] Prime subjects subliminally with negative stereotypes of Thems, and you exacerbate Them-ing. As noted in chapter 3, amygdala activation* in white subjects seeing black faces is increased if rap music is playing in the background and lessened if music associated with negative white stereotypes—heavy metal—is played instead. Moreover, implicit racial bias is lessened after subliminal exposure to counterstereotypes—faces of popular celebrities of that race.

Such priming can work within seconds to minutes and can persist; for example, the counterstereotype effect lasted at least twenty-four hours.[68] Priming can also be extraordinarily abstract and subtle. An example concerned differences in electroencephalographic (EEG) responses in the brain when looking at same- versus different-race faces. In the study the other-race response lessened if subjects unconsciously felt they were drawing the person toward them—if they were pulling a joystick toward themselves (versus pushing it away) at the time.

Finally, priming is not equally effective at altering all domains of Them-ing; it is easier to subliminally manipulate warmth than competence ratings.

These can be powerful effects. And to be more than merely semantic, the malleability of automatic responses (e.g., of the amygdala) shows that "automatic" does not equal "inevitable."

### *The Conscious, Cognitive Level*

Various overt strategies have been found to decrease implicit biases. A classic one is perspective taking, which enhances identification with Them. For example, in a study concerning age bias, having subjects take the perspective of older individuals more effectively reduced bias than merely instructing subjects to inhibit stereotypical thoughts. Another is to consciously focus on counterstereotypes. In one such study automatic sexual biases were lessened more when men were instructed to imagine a strong woman with positive attributes, than when they were instructed to attempt stereotype suppression. Another strategy is to make implicit biases explicit—show people evidence of their automatic biases. More to come concerning these strategies.[69]

### *Changing the Rank Ordering of Us/Them Categories*

This refers to the multiple Us/Them dichotomies we carry and the ease of shifting their priority—shifting automatic categorizing by race to categorizing by shirt color or manipulating math performance by emphasizing either gender or ethnicity. Shifting which categorization is at the forefront isn't necessarily a great thing and may just constitute six of one, half a dozen of the other—for example, among European American men, a photograph of an Asian woman applying makeup makes gender automaticity stronger than ethnic automaticity, while a picture of her using chopsticks does the opposite. More effective than getting people to shift a Them of one category into merely another type of Them, of course, is to shift the Them to being perceived as an Us—emphasizing attributes in common.[70] Which brings us to . . .

### *Contact*

In the 1950s the psychologist Gordon Allport proposed "contact theory."[71] Inaccurate version: if you bring Us-es and Thems together (say, teenagers from two hostile nations brought together in a summer camp), animosities disappear, similarities become more important than differences, and everyone becomes an Us. More accurate version: put Us-es and Thems together under very narrow circumstances and something sort of resembling that happens, but you can also blow it and worsen things.

Some of those effective narrower circumstances: there are roughly equal numbers from each side; everyone's treated equally and unambiguously; contact is lengthy and on neutral, benevolent territory; there are "superordinate" goals where everyone works together on a task they care about (say, the summer campers turning an overgrown meadow into a soccer field).[72]

### *Essentialism Versus Individuation*

This harks back to two important earlier points. First, that Thems tend to be viewed as homogeneous, simple, and having an unchangeable (and negative) essence. Second, that being forced to think of a Them as an individual can make them seem more like an Us. Decreasing essentialist thinking via individuation is a powerful tool.

One elegant study showed this. White subjects were given a questionnaire assessing the extent of their acceptance of racial inequalities, after being given one of two primes.[73] The first bolstered essentialist thinking about race as invariant and homogeneous—"Scientists pinpoint the genetic underpinnings of race." The other prime was antiessentialist—"Scientists reveal that race has no genetic basis." Being primed toward essentialism made subjects more accepting of racial inequalities.

### *Hierarchy*

Predictably, making hierarchies steeper, more consequential, or more overt worsens Them-ing; the need for justification fuels those on top to pour the stereotypes of, at best, high warmth/low competence or, worse, low warmth/low competence onto the heads of those struggling at the bottom, and those on the bottom reciprocate with the simmering time bomb that is the perception of the ruling class as low warmth/high competence.[74] Fiske has explored how those on top perceiving the underclass as high warmth/low competence can stabilize the status quo; the powerful feel self-congratulatory about their presumed benevolence, while the subordinated are placated by the sops of respect. Supporting this, across thirty-seven countries, higher levels of income inequality correlate with more of the condescension of HL perceptions trickling down. Jost has explored this in a related way, examining how myths of "No one has it all"

can reinforce the status quo. For example, the cultural trope of "poor but happy"—the poor are more carefree, more in touch with and able to enjoy the simple things in life—and the myth of the rich as unhappy, stressed, and burdened with responsibility (think of miserable, miserly Scrooge and those warm, loving Cratchits) are great ways to keep things from changing. The trope of "poor but honest," by throwing a sop of prestige to Thems, is another great means of rationalizing the system.*

Individual differences in how people feel about hierarchy help explain variation in the extent of Them-ing. This is shown in studies examining social-dominance orientation (SDO: how much someone values prestige and power) and right-wing authoritarianism (RWA: how much someone values centralized authority, the rule of law, and convention).[75] High-SDO individuals show the greatest increases in automatic prejudices when feeling threatened; more acceptance of bias against low-status out-groups; if male, more tolerance of sexism. And as discussed, people high in SDO (and/or in RWA) are less bothered by hostile humor about out-groups.

Related to our all being part of multiple Us/Them dichotomies is our simultaneous membership in multiple hierarchies.[76] No surprise, people emphasize the importance of the hierarchy in which they rank highest—being captain of the company's weekend softball team takes on more significance than the lousy, lowly nine-to-five job during the week. Particularly interesting are hierarchies that tend to map onto Us/Them categories (for example, when race and ethnicity overlap heavily with socioeconomic status). In those cases, those on top tend to emphasize the convergence of the hierarchies and the importance of assimilating the values of the core hierarchy ("Why can't they all just call themselves 'Americans' instead of 'Ethnicity-Americans'?"). Interestingly, this is a local phenomenon—whites tend to favor assimilationist, unitary adherence to national values while African Americans favor more pluralism; however, the opposite occurs concerning campus life and policies among white and African American students at traditionally black universities. We can keep two contradictory things in our heads at the same time if that works to our benefit.

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Thus, in order to lessen the adverse effects of Us/Them-ing, a shopping list would include emphasizing individuation and shared attributes, perspective taking, more benign dichotomies, lessening hierarchical differences, and bringing people together on equal terms with shared goals. All to be revisited.

# CONCLUSIONS

An analogy concerning health: Stress can be bad for you. We no longer die of smallpox or the plague and instead die of stress-related diseases of lifestyle, like heart disease or diabetes, where damage slowly accumulates over time. It is understood how stress can cause or worsen disease or make you more vulnerable to other risk factors. Much of this is even understood on the molecular level. Stress can even cause your immune system to abnormally target hair follicles, causing your hair to turn gray.

All true. Yet stress researchers do not aim to eliminate, to "cure," us of stress. It can't be done, and even if it could, we wouldn't want that—we love stress when it's the right kind; we call it "stimulation."

The analogy is obvious. From massive, breathtaking barbarity to countless pinpricks of microaggression, Us versus Them has produced oceans of pain. Yet our generic goal is not to "cure" us of Us/Them dichotomizing. It can't be done, unless your amygdala is destroyed, in which case everyone seems like an Us. But even if we could, we wouldn't want to eliminate Us/Them-ing.

I'm a fairly solitary person—after all, I've spent a significant amount of my life studying a different species from my own, living alone in a tent in Africa. Yet some of the most exquisitely happy moments of my life have come from feeling like an Us, feeling accepted and not alone, safe and understood, feeling part of something enveloping and larger than myself, filled with a sense of being on the right side and doing both well and good. There are even Us/Thems that I—eggheady, meek, and amorphously pacifistic—would be willing to kill or die for.[77]

If we accept that there will always be sides, it's a nontrivial to-do list item to always be on the side of angels. Distrust essentialism. Keep in mind that what seems like rationality is often just rationalization, playing catch-up with subterranean forces that we never suspect. Focus on the larger, shared goals. Practice perspective taking. Individuate, individuate, individuate. Recall the historical lessons of how often the truly malignant Thems keep themselves hidden and make third parties the fall guy.

And in the meantime, give the right-of-way to people driving cars with the “Mean people suck” bumper sticker, and remind everyone that we’re all in it together against Lord Voldemort and the House Slytherin.