

Tribalism in a hyper-connected world

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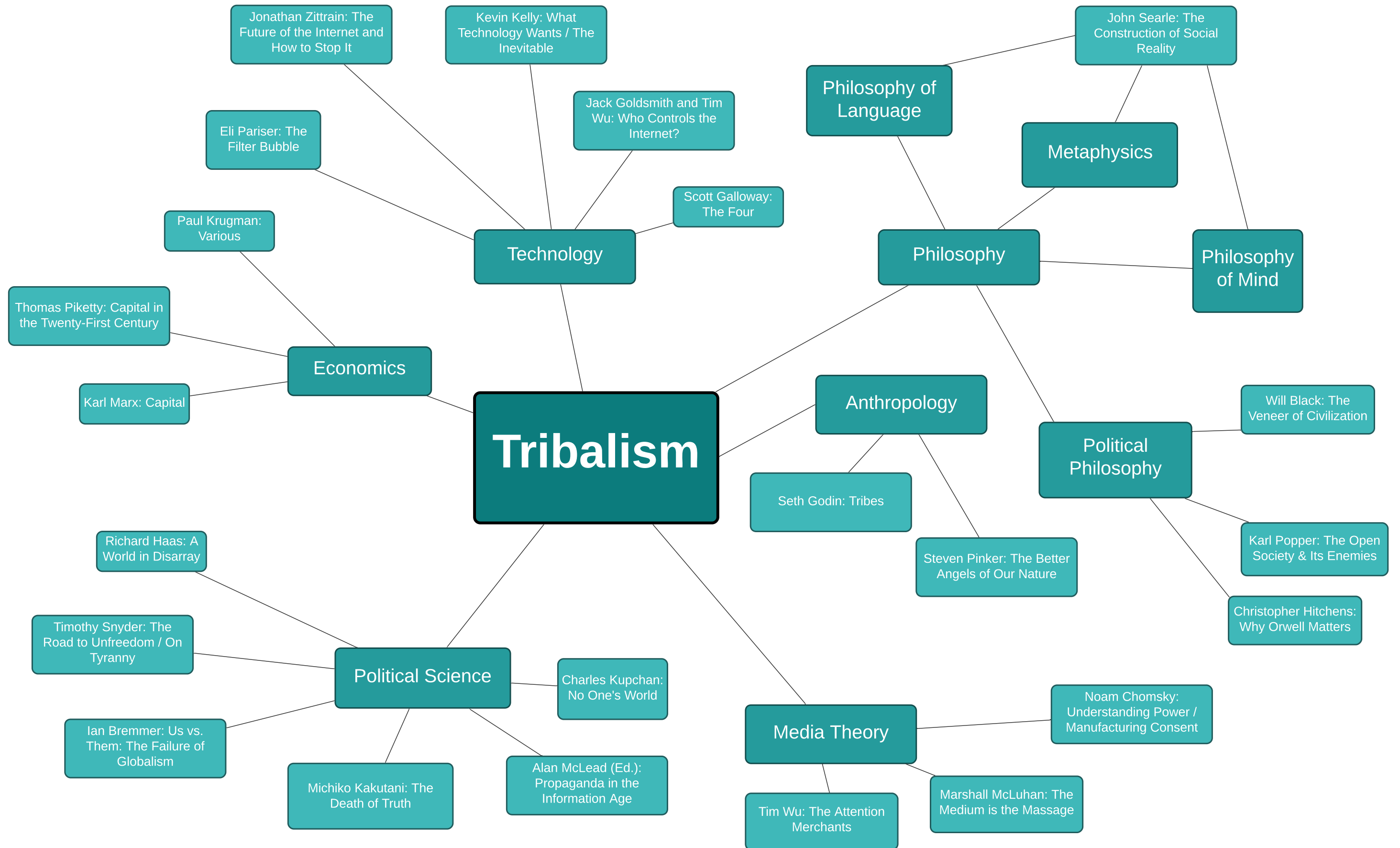
“A resurgent and toxic nationalism has begun to eat Europe alive, and the internet has become an accelerant poured on the flame.”

Tribalism in a Hyper-Connected World
(medium.com)

4 July, 2016

Photo: Zbigniew Osioły





q1: Why does tribalism thrive in the modern world?

q2: What is the relationship between tribalism and technology?

q3: What should be done?

q1: Why does tribalism thrive in the modern world?

Hypothesis: the 21st century has provided fertile ground for tribalism to take root.

- **weakening of institutions**
- **widespread economic inequality and exploitation**
- **displacement and migration of vulnerable populations**

tribalism

[trahy-buh-liz-uh m]

noun

1. the customs and beliefs of tribal life and society.
2. strong loyalty to one's own tribe, party, or group.

tribus [Latin]

[/'tri.bus/, ['tri.bʊs]]

noun

1. One of the three original tribes of Rome:
Ramnes, Tities, Luceres.
2. A division of the Roman people.
3. A tribe.
4. The mob, the lower classes.

A black and white photograph of a massive flock of birds, likely terns, flying over a field. The birds are densely packed in the sky and on the ground, creating a sense of intense activity and movement. The background shows a flat landscape with some distant structures under a bright sky.

Tribalism is a **tendency** – a
predisposition – inherited from
prehistory.

A black and white photograph of a massive flock of birds, likely terns, flying over a field. The birds are densely packed in the sky and on the ground, creating a sense of intense activity and community. The background shows a flat landscape with some distant structures under a bright sky.

It can be a tool for **building communities** around a **shared identity**.

Photo: Josef Koudelka



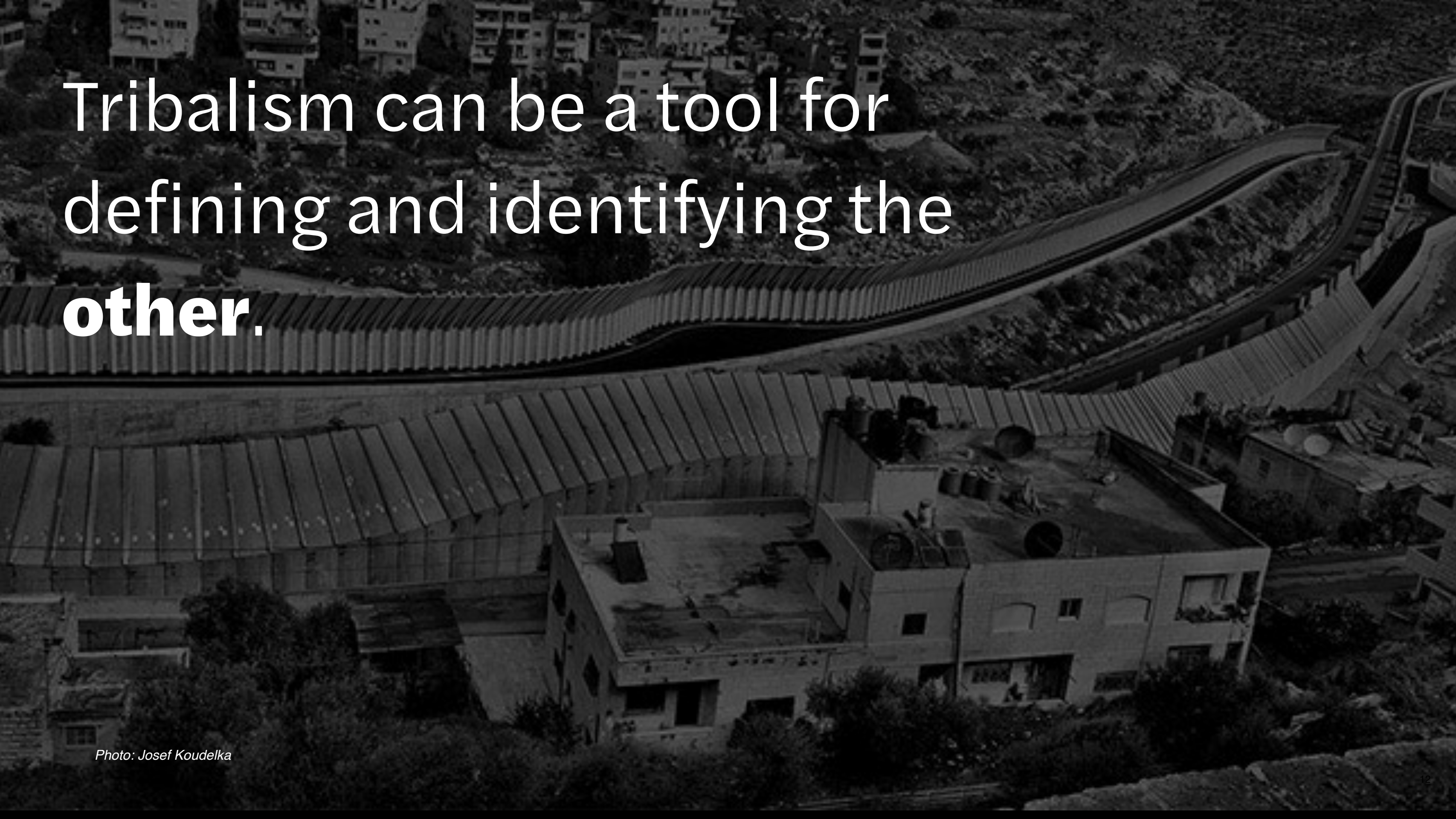
It can be a tool for **selling**.

Brands have become the tribes of capitalism in the 21st century.

“We are living through and are at a key moment in a change in how ideas are created and spread and implemented.”

– Seth Godin, “Tribes”




An aerial, high-angle photograph of a densely populated urban area, likely in a developing country. The image is dominated by a long, curved concrete structure, possibly a highway or a large bridge, that winds through the landscape. The surrounding area is filled with numerous small, multi-story buildings, many of which have flat roofs. The overall scene is characterized by a high density of structures and a complex network of roads and pathways. The lighting is somewhat dim, suggesting an overcast day or a specific time of day. The text is overlaid on the upper left portion of the image.

Tribalism can be a tool for
defining and identifying the
other.

Photo: Josef Koudelka

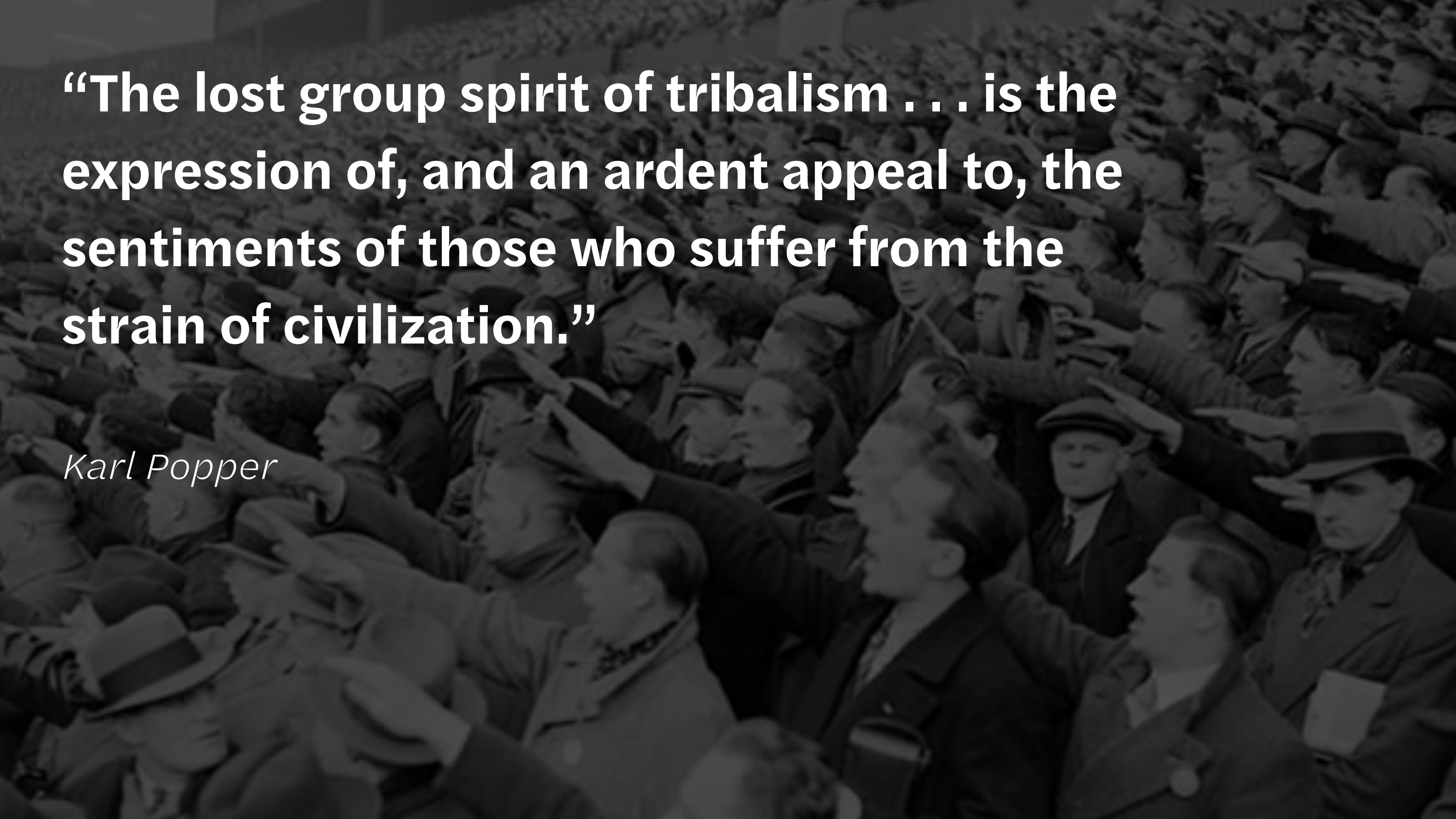


In times of geopolitical duress, tribalism
tends toward the **defensive**, **divisive**,
and **exploitative**.



At its worst, tribalism is a utility
for **inciting fear, redirecting
anxiety, and wielding power.**

Photo: Josef Koudelka



“The lost group spirit of tribalism . . . is the expression of, and an ardent appeal to, the sentiments of those who suffer from the strain of civilization.”

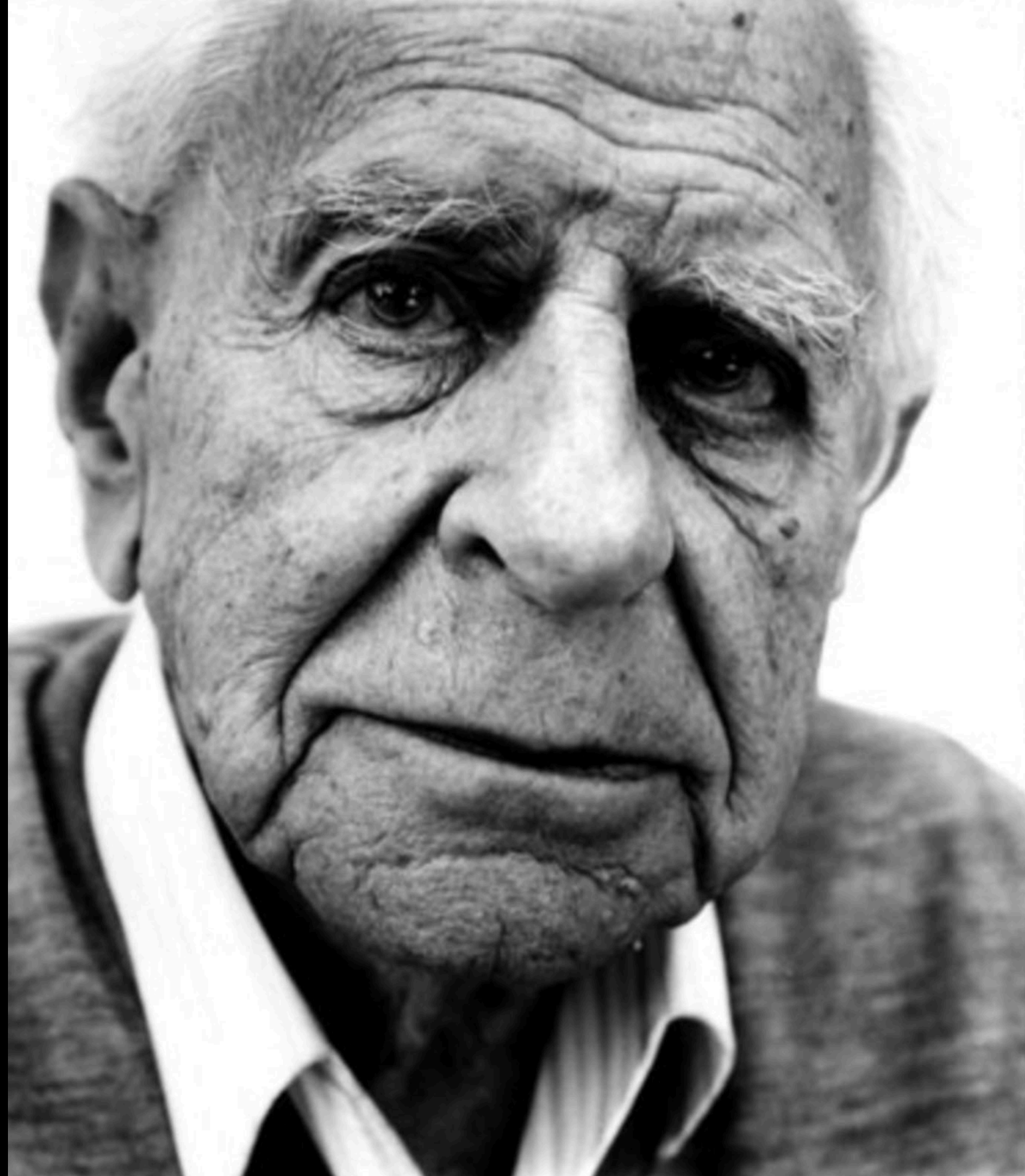
Karl Popper



For Karl Popper, tribalism is in conflict with Enlightenment-inspired principles of **rationalism** and **humanism**.

Popper views tribalism as the antithesis of the **Open Society**, his conception of **pluralism and liberal democratic ideals.**

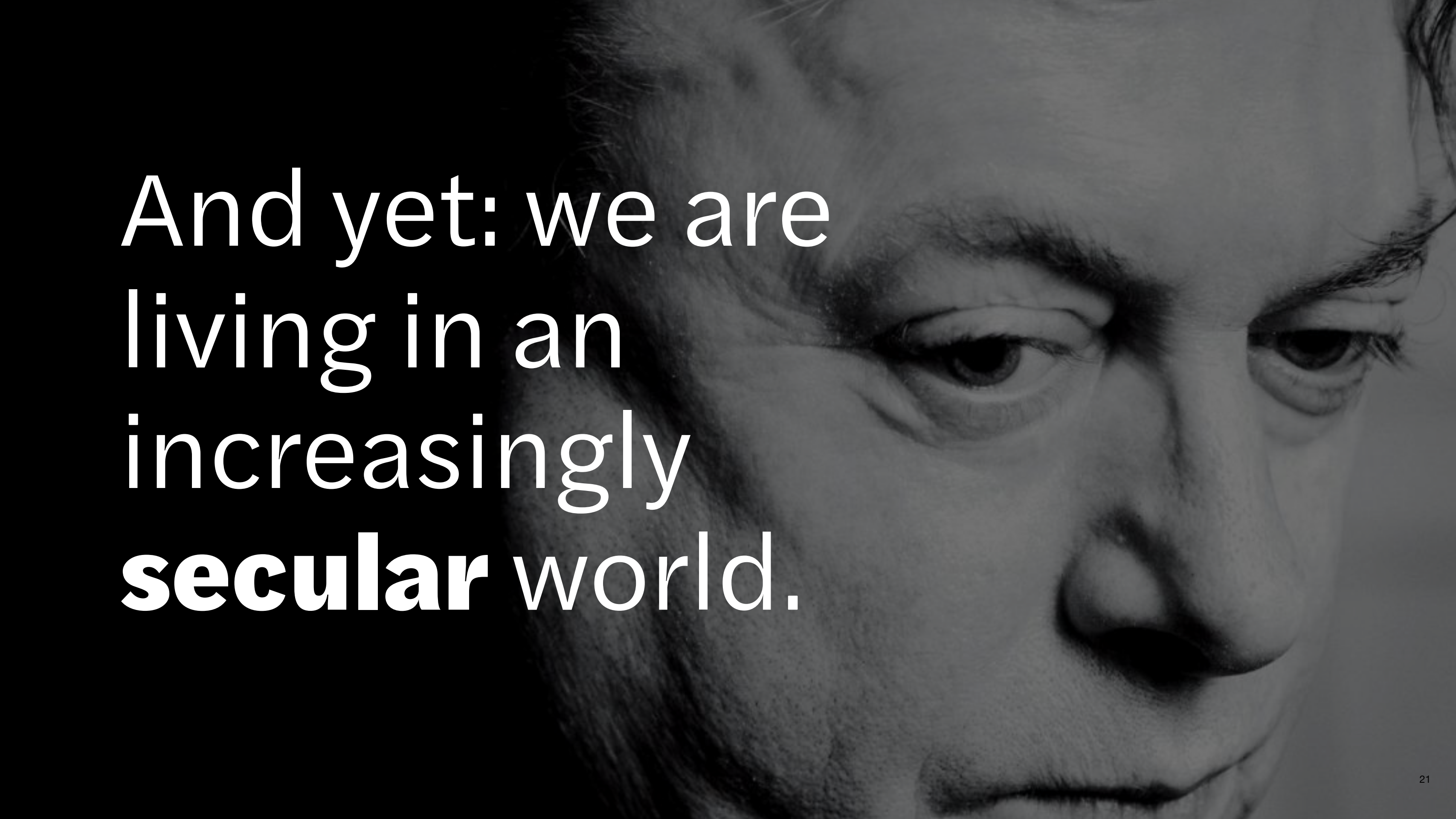
Photo: Steve Pyke



The modern world is seemingly
magical, anxiety-inducing,
and **increasingly unfair.**

We've inherited a world full
of apparent **contradiction.**

Religious extremism has become a central part of political and cultural discourse.



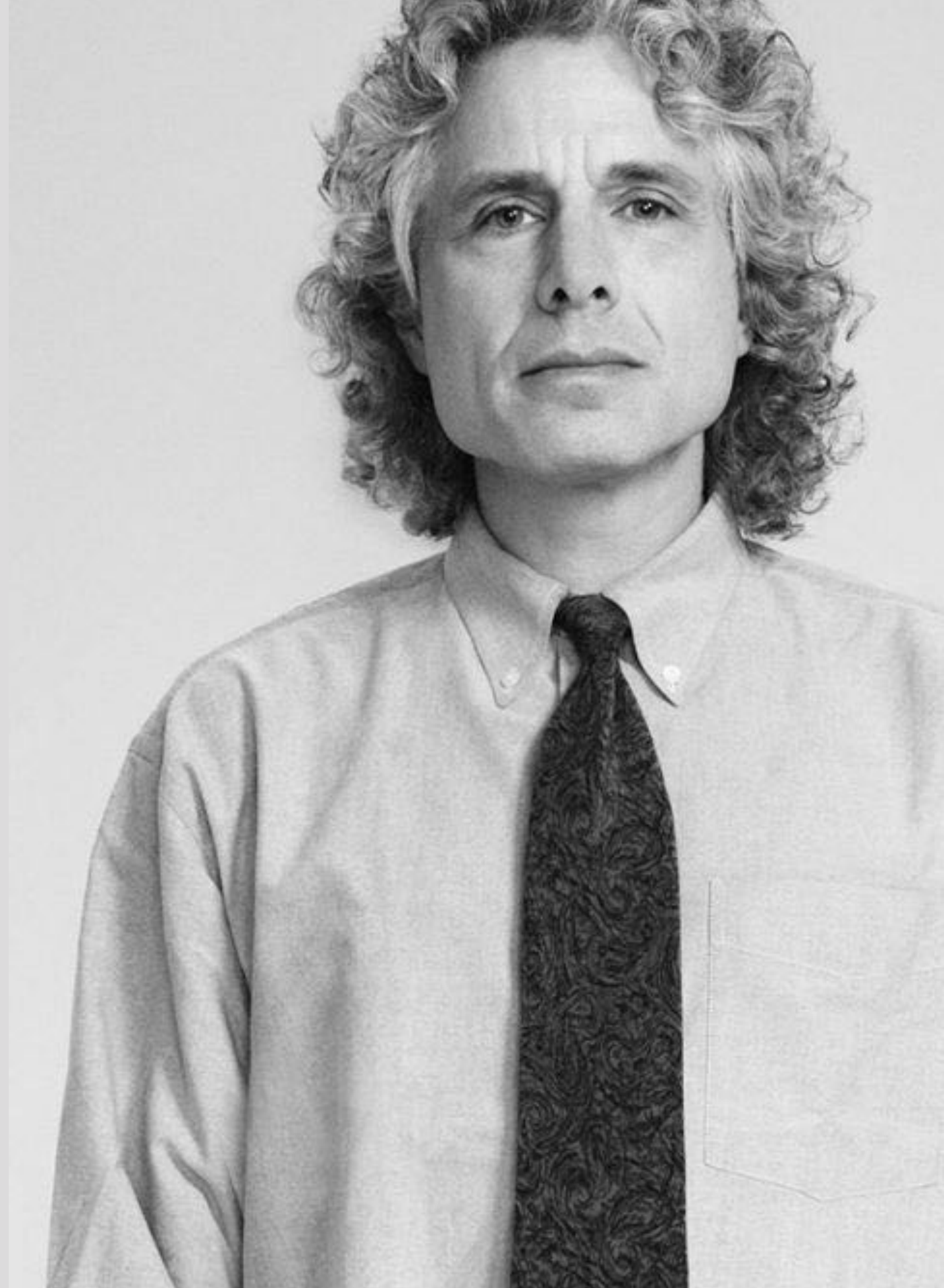
And yet: we are
living in an
increasingly
secular world.

The modern world is largely the product of enormous **scientific, technological, and medical achievement.**

And yet: **skepticism about science** is more widespread than ever before.

Media thrives on stoking fears of **violence, terrorism, and threats from outsiders.**

And yet: the modern world has witnessed a dramatic and systemic **decrease in violence, poverty, and abuse.**



In *The End of History and the Last Man*, Francis Fukuyama supposed that western liberal democratic ideals had won the day. *



And yet: we are witnessing
a resurgence of
**ultranationalist
authoritarian regimes.**





European National Parliaments (May, 2019)



Right-wing populists represented in the parliament



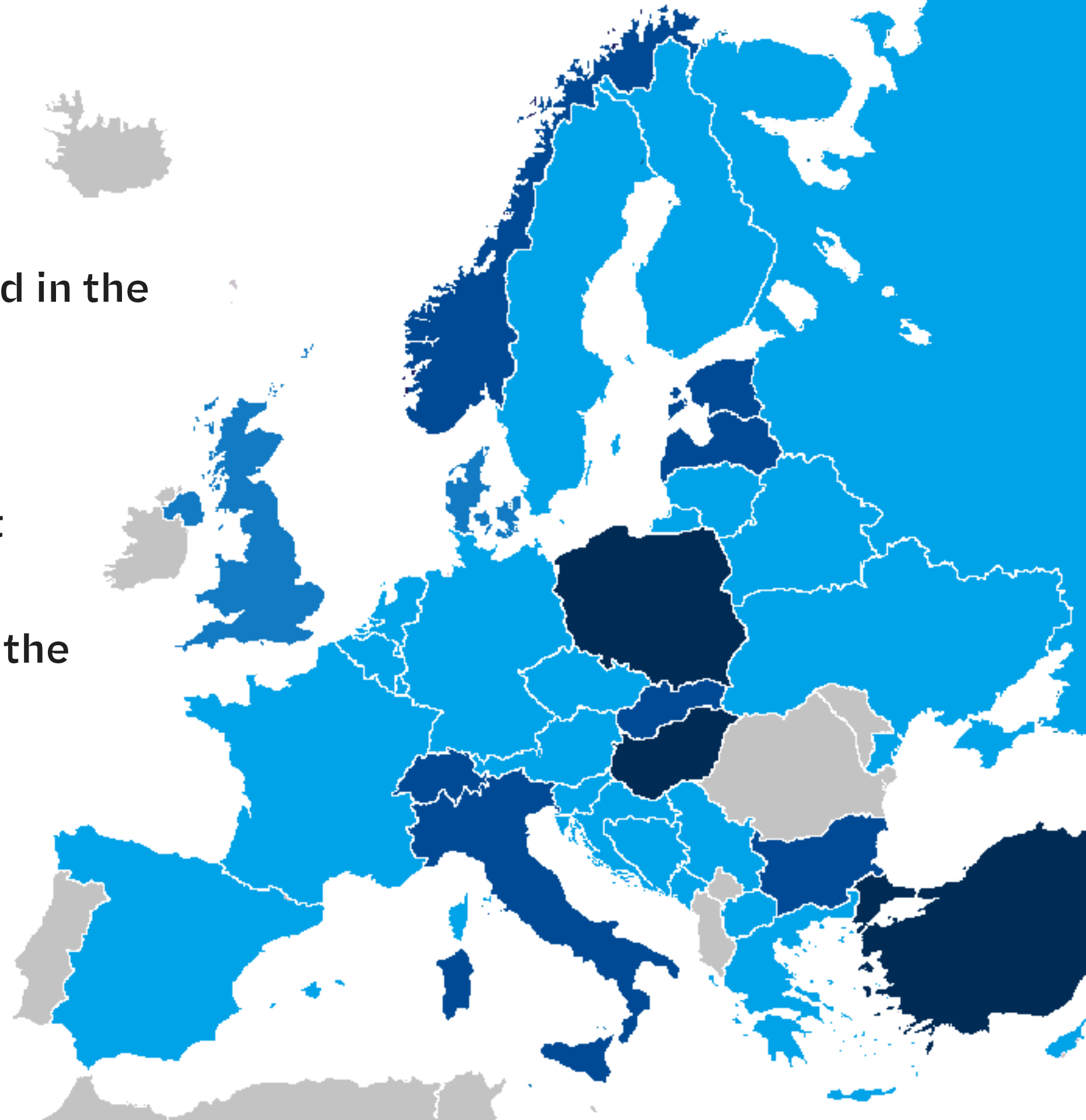
Right-wing populists providing external support for government



Right-wing populists involved in the government



Right-wing populist appointed prime minister

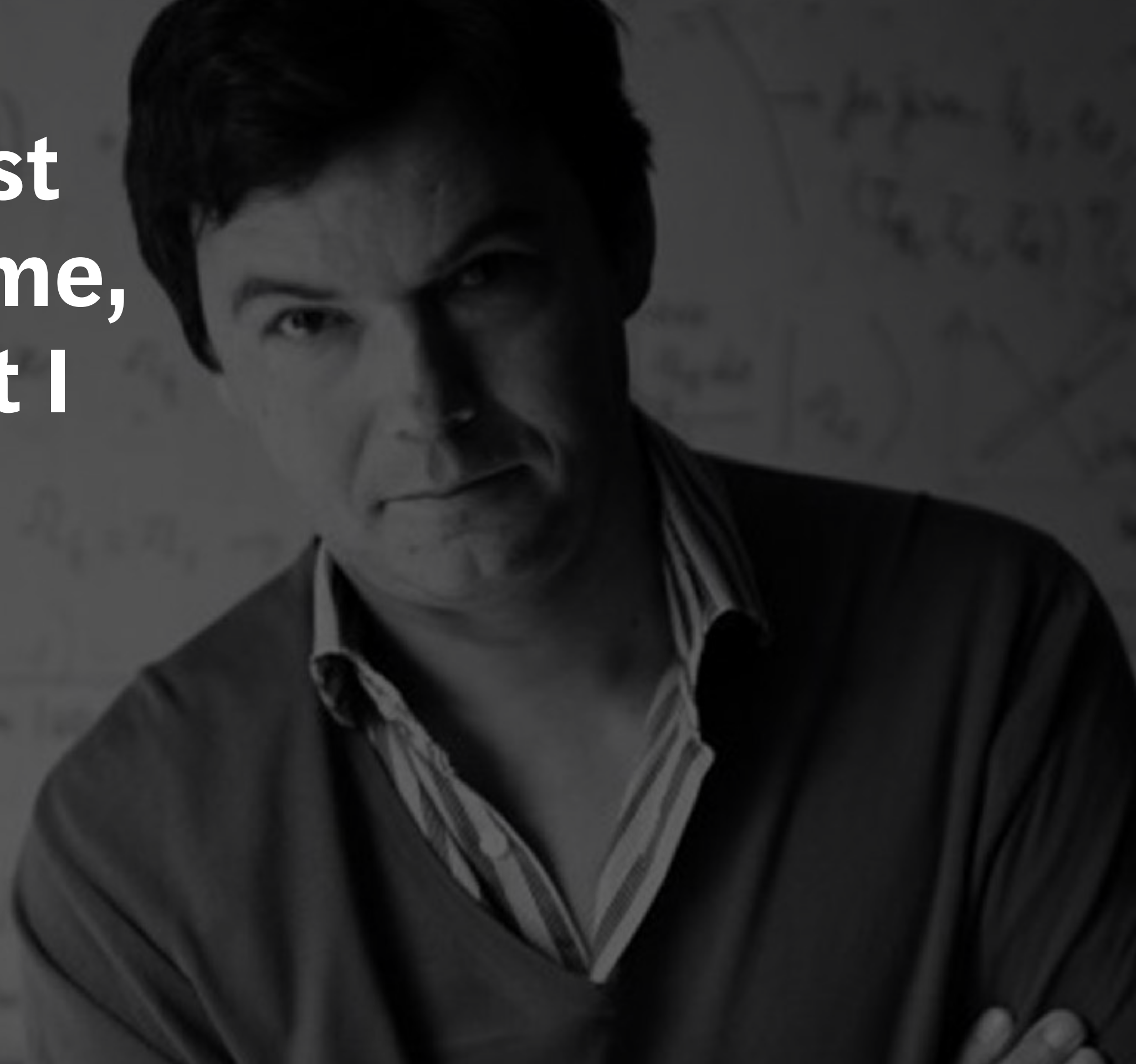


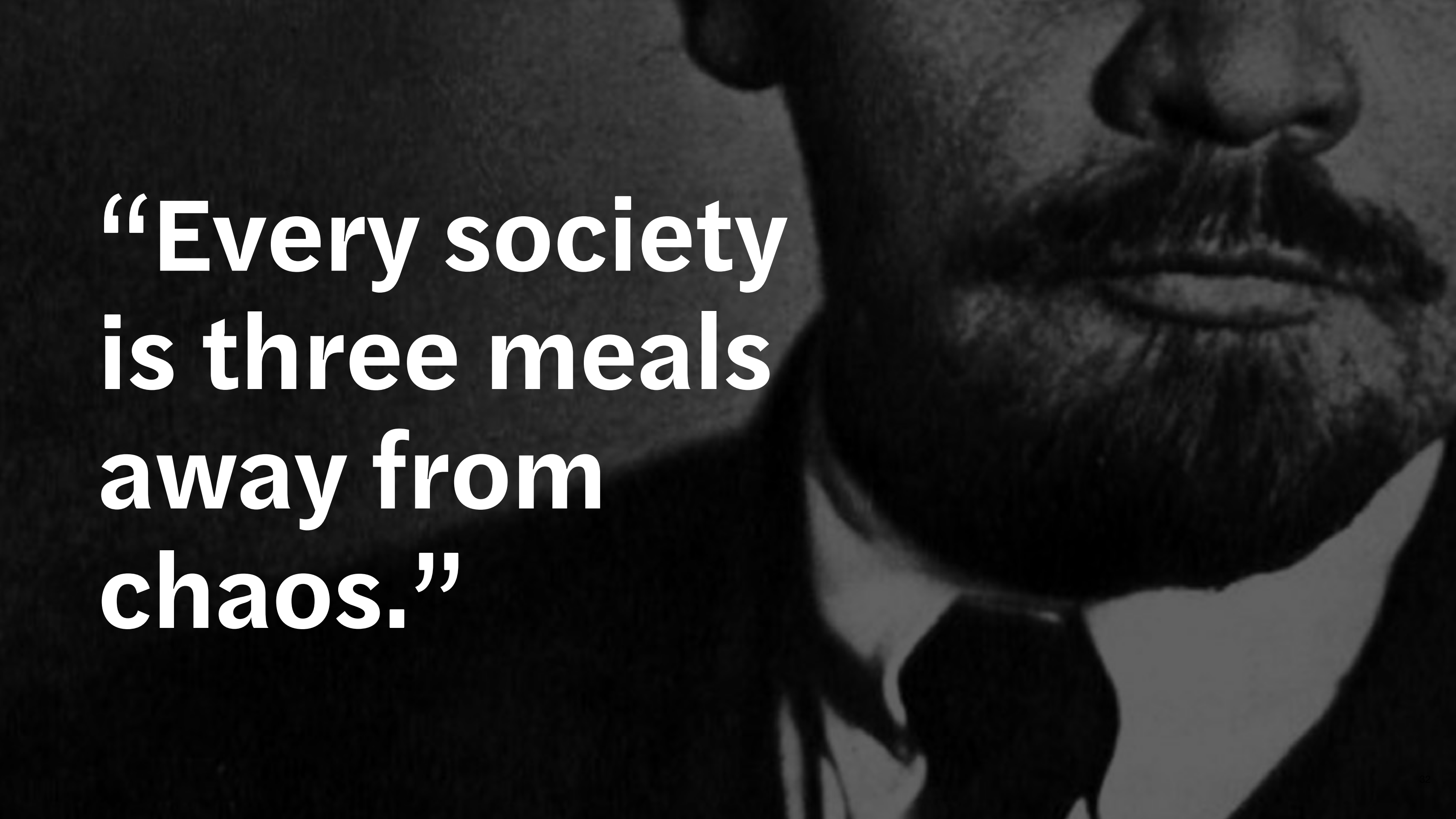
Just as billions are lifted from poverty, a hallmark of the 21st century is **growing income inequality.**

In advanced economies, two-thirds of the population is now on track to be poorer than their parents.


“The twenty-first century scares me, because of what I see in history.”

– Thomas Piketty





**“Every society
is three meals
away from
chaos.”**

An aerial photograph of a large crowd of people on a sandy beach. The people are scattered across the frame, some standing, some sitting, and some walking. The colors of their clothing are varied, including reds, blues, and greens. The overall scene suggests a busy, public gathering.

Identifying the **other** through
widespread global migration
and displacement.

“Us vs. Them: The Failure of Globalism”

Ian Bremmer

“Worldwide populism is a response from people who are being left behind economically.

Those in wealthy democracies feel the system is rigged against them.”



Tribalism is a symptom, rather than a cause, of the serious and existential crises of our time: inequality, climate change, and political instability.

It's a symptom of severe and pervasive **institutional decay.**

q2: What is the relationship between tribalism and technology?

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Hypothesis: technology and social media amplify our best and worst tribal tendencies.

- **without proper governance, technology and social media foster partisan and tribal tendencies**
- **in its current form, social media is easily manipulated**
- **the future can be *terrifying***

**“It’s the business
of the future to be
dangerous.”**


– A.N. Whitehead



“Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.”

Clarke's Third Law



A large crowd of people, primarily women wearing headscarves, are gathered outdoors. Many individuals are holding up their smartphones high in the air, suggesting they are recording a public event or protest. The scene is overlaid with a semi-transparent dark grey filter. The text is centered on the left side of the image.

**The internet was
promised to be a
democratizing force.**

It has equally become a tool for oppression,
surveillance, and manipulation.

Digital media platforms, once thought to be a democratizing force, largely reflect and reinforce **corporate interests and power.**

- The dynamics of ad-sponsored media in the 21st century are virtually unchanged from the pre-digital era.
- Corporate-controlled social media platforms are incentivized to maximize “engagement” – billions of dollars are at stake.
- The internet has reinforced a massively centralized (but highly personalized) framework for media consumption.



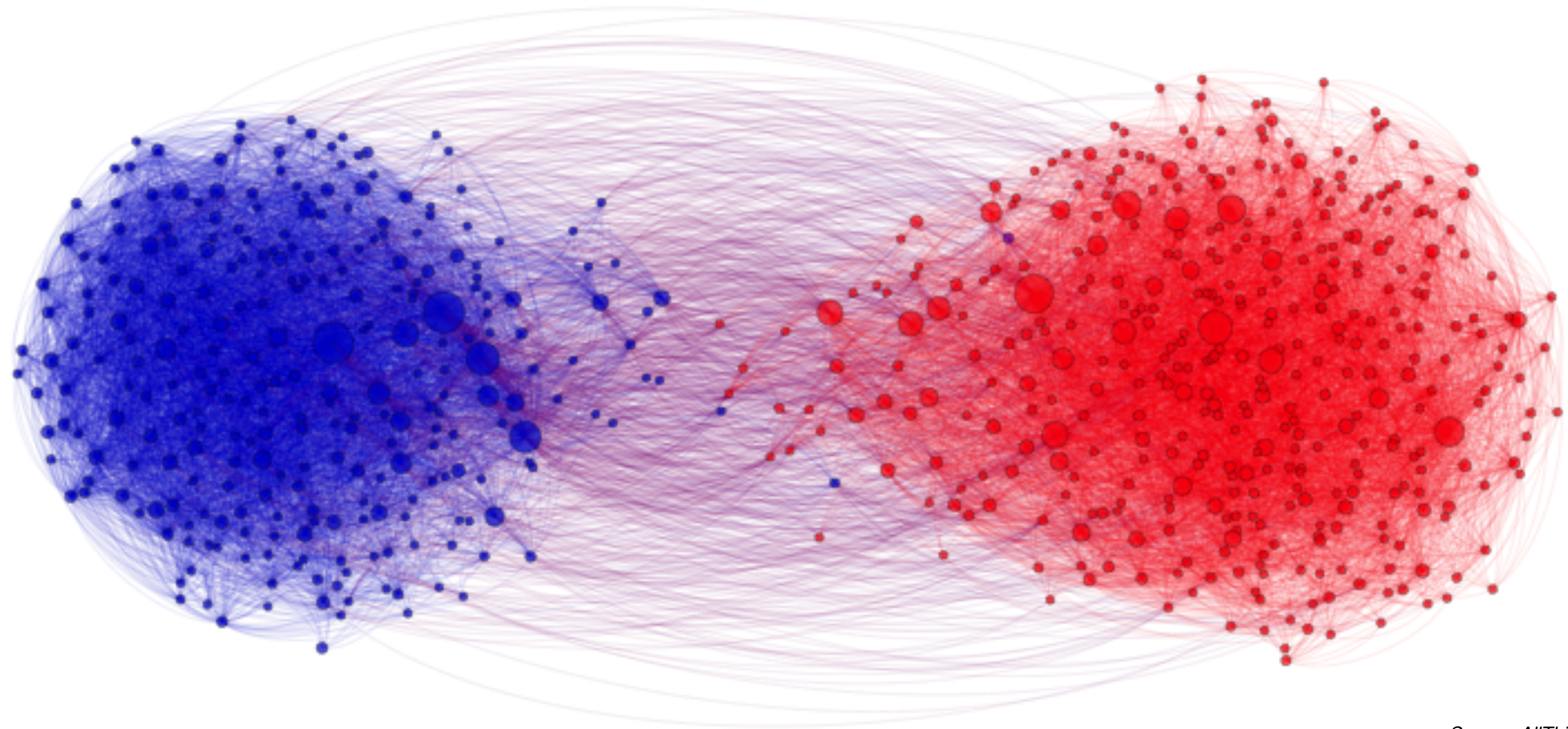
The new commodity of
digital media is *attention*.

“Owning the home screen.”

The new editor of digital
media is *the algorithm*.

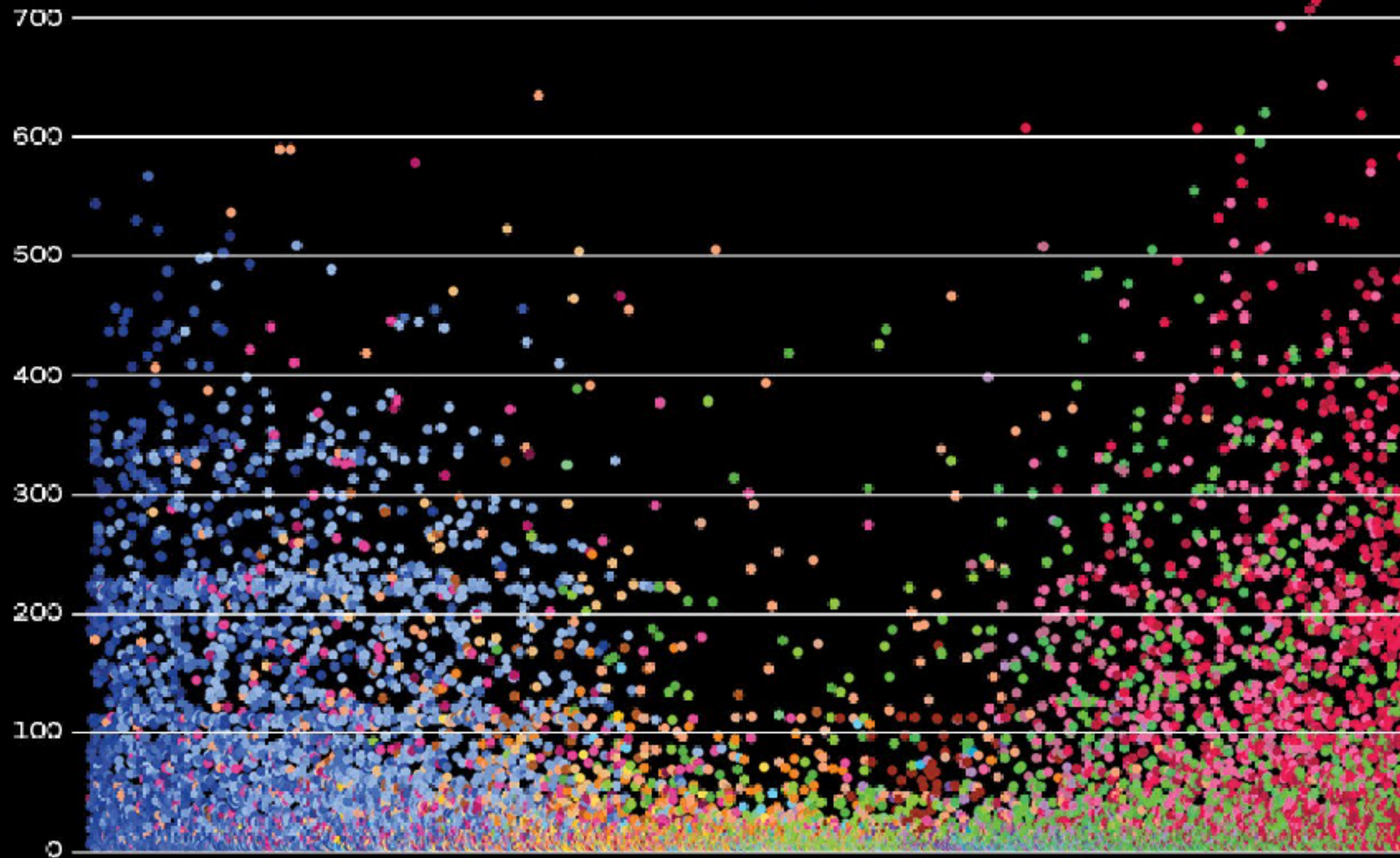
Filter bubbles

Social media is increasingly personalized and designed to optimize engagement. This means that each individual is seeing a presentation of content that's uniquely tailored to them.



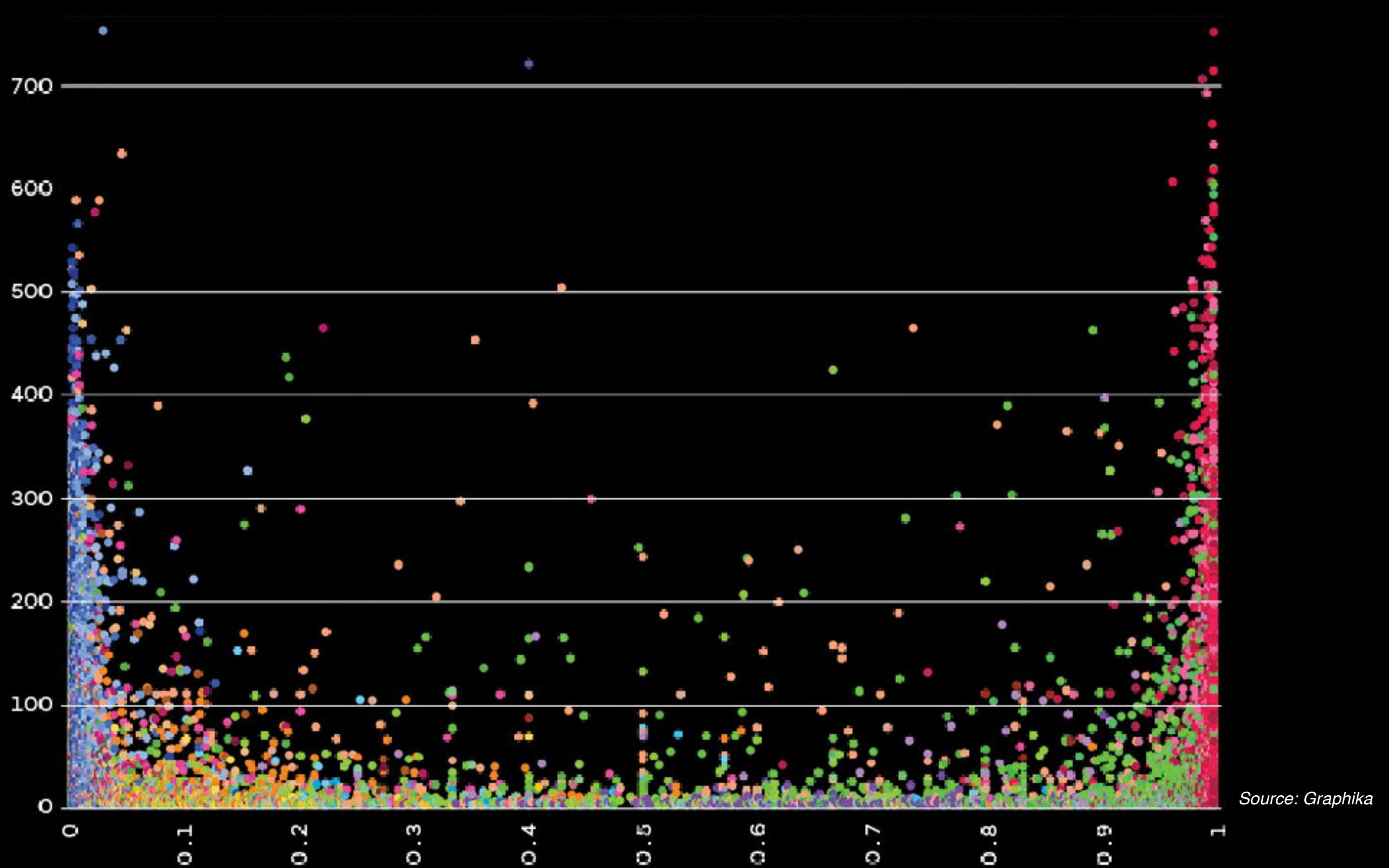
Source: AllThingsGraphed.com

Force-directed graph showing links between left-leaning and right-leaning political blogs in the US.

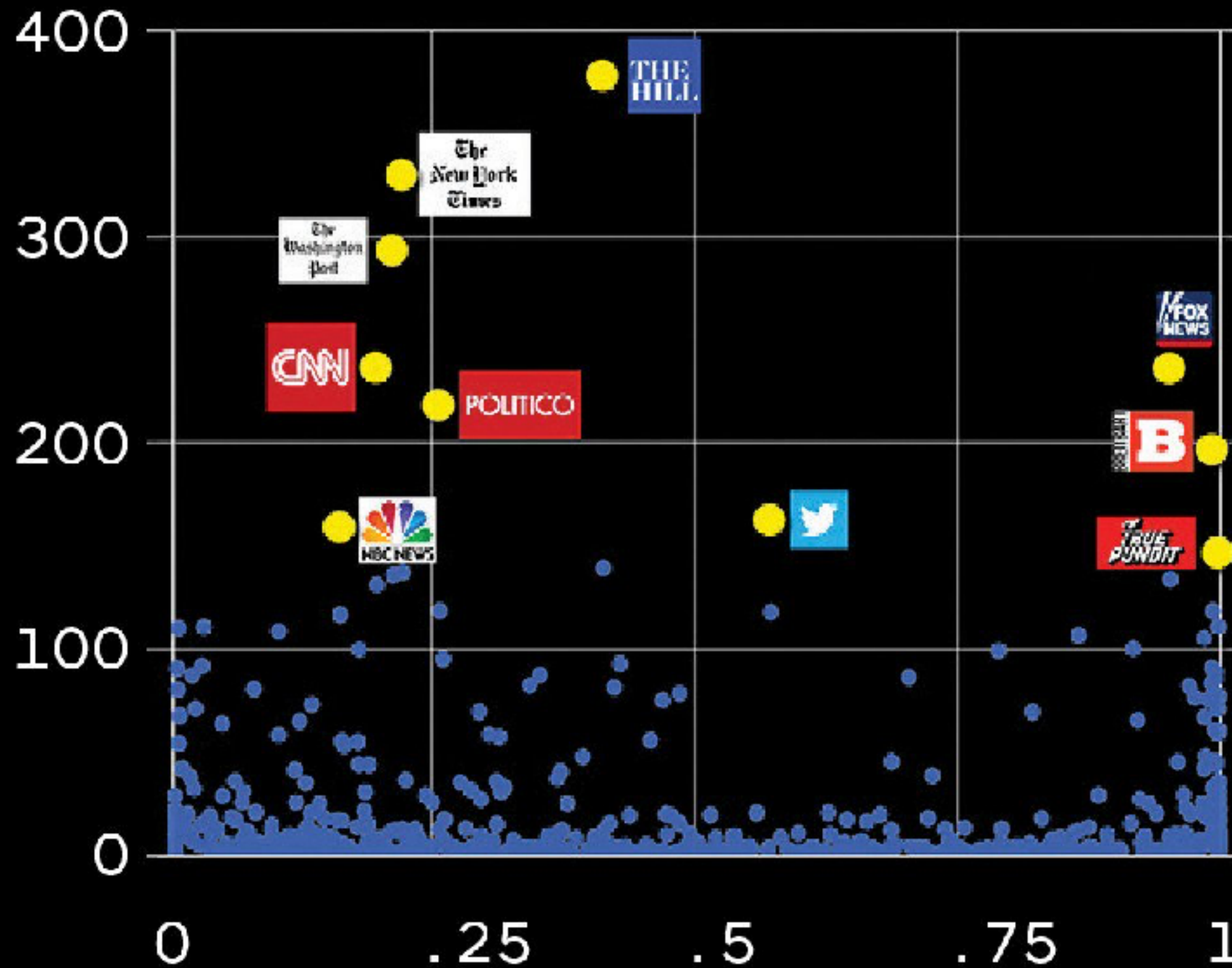


Source: Graphika

A plot of average daily tweets show that accounts on the political extremes are most active; the center is silent.

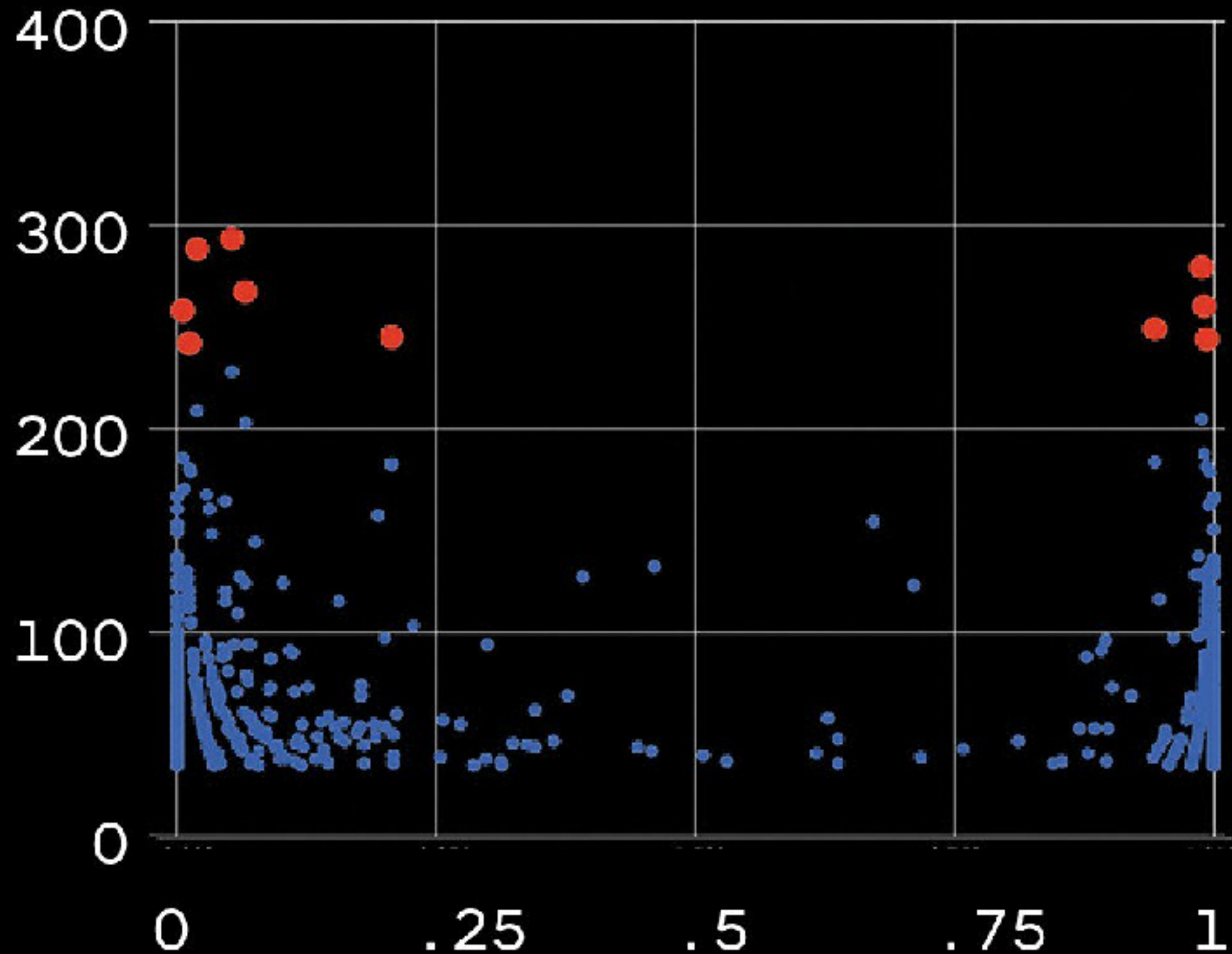


The polarization becomes even more apparent when accounts are plotted by “valence” – a measure of how politically homogenous their connections are.



Source: Graphika

Citation of news sources by Twitter accounts in the US political landscape.



Source: Graphika

The most-shared individual articles are the most partisan.

A painting of several nude figures in a circle, rendered in a dark red color against a dark blue background. The figures are in various poses, some holding hands, suggesting a social or communal activity. The style is somewhat abstract and expressive.

Our shared perceptions of reality are constructed by shared consent.

Perception of reality is a largely social enterprise, deeply influenced by shared concepts and the collective usage of language.

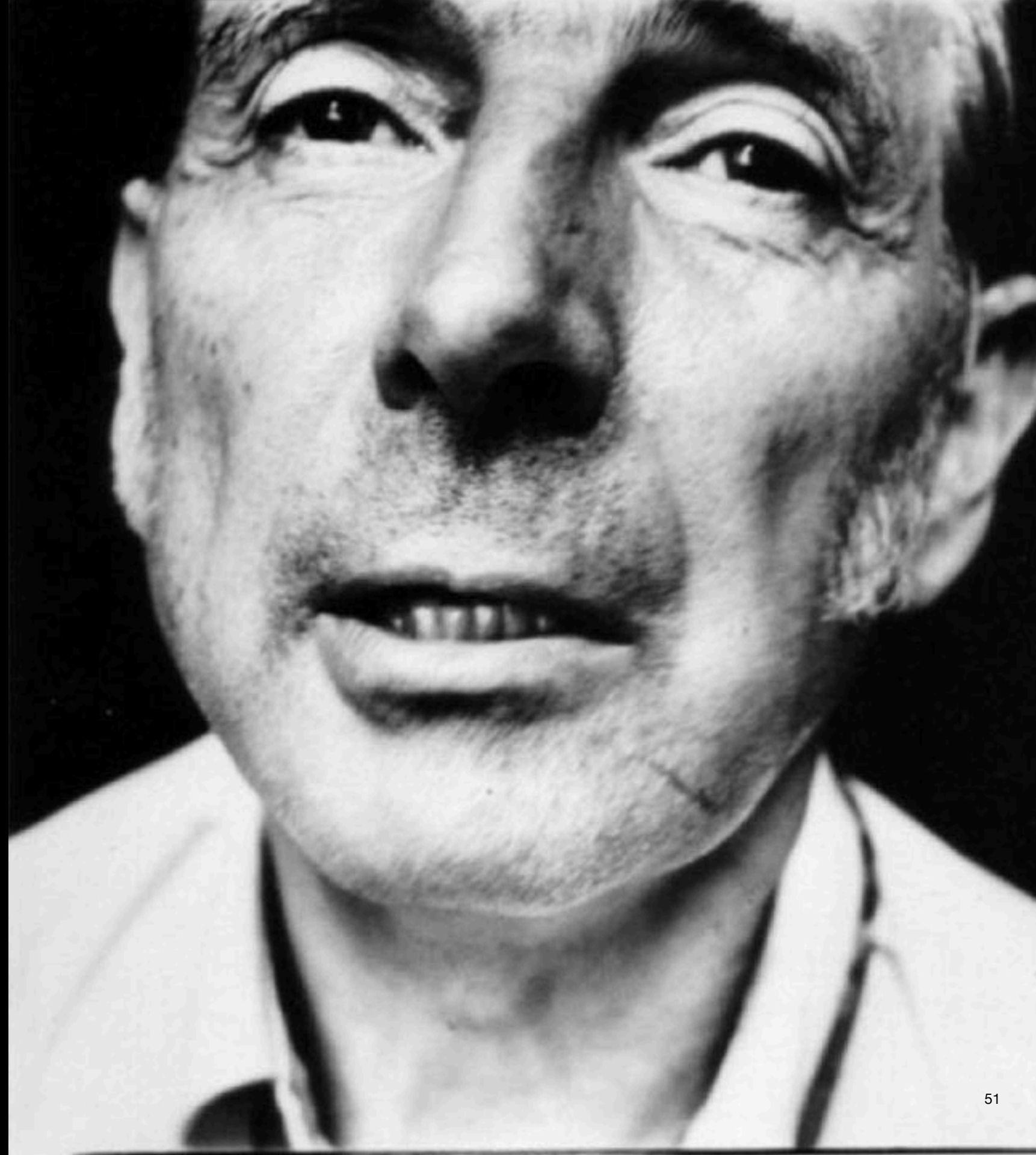
And it's deeply vulnerable to manipulation.

“Institutional power – massive, pervasive, and typically invisible – permeates every nook and cranny of our social lives...the invisible structure of social reality.”

– John Searle

The Construction of Social Reality

Photo: Steve Pyke



Methods of control by authoritarian regimes in closed societies:

- the manipulation of perceived reality through **language** and **propaganda**.
- the manipulation of behavior through **threats of violence** or **arrest**.

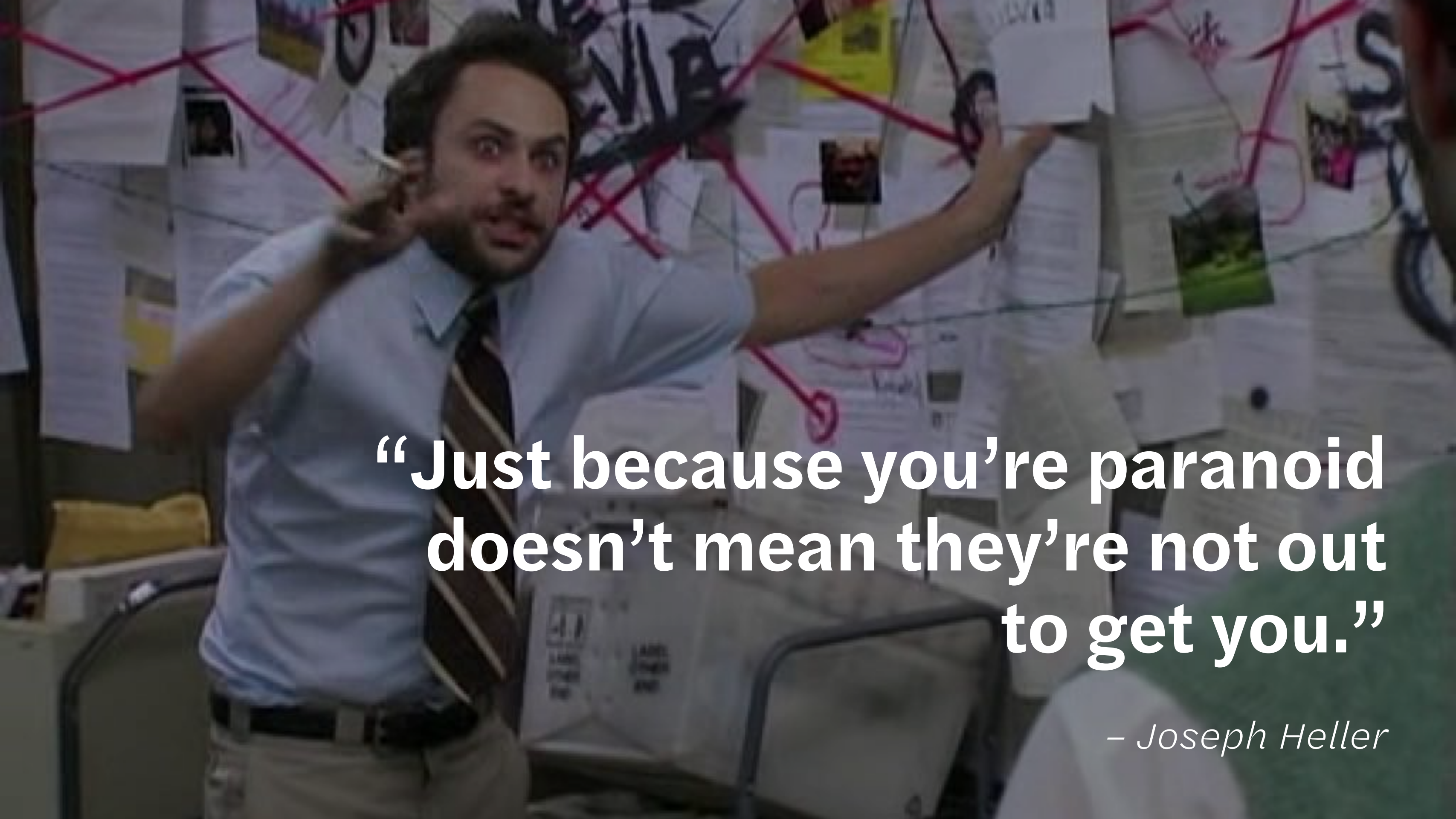
Methods of control in free societies:

- the manipulation of perceived reality through **disinformation, public relations, corporate media, and advertising.**
- the manipulation of public opinion through **micro-targeting and personalization.**

q3: What should we do?

q3: What should we do?

- **embrace principles of pluralism and tolerance**
- **foster and support democratic institutions**
- **support measures to reduce income inequality**
- **hold technology companies accountable**
- **identify and resist authoritarian tendencies**
- **organization and collective action**



**“Just because you’re paranoid
doesn’t mean they’re not out
to get you.”**

– Joseph Heller

Thank you.

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@danleslie



Further Reading

1. Will Black, *The Veneer of Civilization*
2. Ian Bremmer, *Us vs. Them: The Failure of Globalism*
3. Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*
4. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*
5. Seth Godin, *Tribes*
6. Christopher Hitchens, *Why Orwell Matters*
7. Michiko Kakutani, *The Death of Truth*
8. Alan MacLeod (Ed.), *Propaganda in the Information Age*
9. Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium is the Massage*
10. Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble*
11. Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the 21st Century*
12. Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*
13. Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*
14. John Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality*
15. Tim Wu, *The Attention Merchants*