

Against Dehumanisation: Interview on “Vulnerable Minds: The Neuropolitics of Divided Societies” with Liya Yu

Journal of Intercultural Studies, Vol. 45, 3, October 2023

Ting-Fai: Hello, Liya! Thank you for coming for this interview. We want to learn more about your book and how you conceptualise current issues that most characterise our lives. In *Vulnerable Minds: The Neuropolitics of Divided Societies*, you argue that a newer political approach can help us talk to those with whom we disagree in a highly polarised political climate. So, can you tell us what strategies are there for achieving this?

Liya: First of all, thank you so much for inviting me. To me, one of the central aims of my book is to improve intercultural identities and their well-being. We live in highly polarized societies in which you have people in the same families who don't speak to each other about politics or cannot agree on the most even most fundamental questions on how they want to lead their lives in society and what they think should be the most fundamental rules that govern our lives. We seem to have very few strategies in liberal democracies to engage with these people. It's either not engaging at all, or doing it with a sense of moral superiority, that we feel we are the better ones. We don't see their most basic emotional, economic, political, social needs as similar to ours. We often dehumanize people from so-called outgroups, and prioritise humanising our own ingroup members. My approach offers a different take. I look into the neurocognitive conditions of inclusion: What actually needs to be in place, neurocognitively, so that I can see somebody else as fully human. Here, humanising somebody does not mean that you have to fully agree with them. It just means that you can fathom where they're coming from. My point is that, in this currently highly polarized climate, moralising persuasive strategies that we've been using have failed. We can see that with the election of various populist authoritarian leaders and the rise of right-wing extremism. This is why I'm trying to offer a new language and practical strategies to engage the brains of those we disagree with so that they can actually also humanise us. It goes both ways.

Ting-Fai: In the book, you mentioned that your identity as an Asian diasporic woman partly motivated you to devise a social contract theory concerning our universal brains. Why did you say that, and can you further contextualise the social contract described in your work?

Liya: The social contract is an idea that has arisen with modern state theorists such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. It means that we enter into mutual political obligations that we owe to each other. Well, first of all, the question is, what is our human condition before we enter these obligations? Is the state of nature brutish, as Hobbes believed? What needs to happen so we can all agree to form society and exit this state of nature? This sounds a little abstract, but really it is the foundation of everything that you see, whether it's us agreeing to the same judicial system, the outcome democratic elections or shared economic rules. All of this is part of the social contract. Put more simply, the social contract is the idea that we are connected to each other. We sacrifice to a certain degree so that we can all benefit from something greater. In Hobbes's case, it is security because opposite of that for him was civil war and the breakdown of all orders.

My book is a new Hobbesian attempt of rewriting the social contract, because we are at a point of breakdown in many societies, where we no longer agree on anything. I want to offer knowledge about the cognitive conditions of us cooperating successfully, and the reasons why we fight, and yes, also want to annihilate each other.

Now you have to imagine me sitting in a seminar room in illustrious universities in western societies – societies where I believe I belong but people usually deny me this belonging – and partake in political and philosophical debates. My experience usually is that my existence and my body do not fit in because they are not included in the political theories that are at stake.

My body is also not represented in the canon: the canon of the social contract, or the people that I mentioned just now, you know, are all white men. Despite feminist political theorists, it is still a very white male-dominated field, both in terms of the people who populate it and the limited imagination of what it means to be human within the existing philosophical and epistemological concepts. I was not fully included explicitly or implicitly. That's why I wanted to be included, fully, not just as a token minority appendix, but radically through my physical existence as an Asian woman, from my brain cells upwards. And I knew I could only achieve that if I brought in a layer of reality, which would be a neuroscientific one: the reality about our universal brains.

Ting-Fai: Your book most struck me by how it makes explicit that the vulnerable brain, as a shared cognitive structure, is a universal phenomenon. This claim departs from most critical discourses that racism is culturally relative and socially shaped. From an ethical standpoint, how are we to live with exclusionary identity politics when it is, as the book suggests, part of what defines us as human beings?

Liya: I don't think the two are contradictory. Neuroscience captures brain activity, while social and cultural psychology and the more classical social sciences capture behavioural and attitudinal data. For example, somebody can say that they're not a racist. But at the brain level, there might be processes that are happening, such as in the fusiform face area (which detects other-race faces within milliseconds) or insula (disgust-triggered racism). In this case what the person says and what their brain does does not match up, that's why the neurocognitive data is implicit data. In the wake of the Civil Rights Movement and the emergence of new political standards that prohibited explicit racism, social psychologists knew that racism still existed, and they want to measure it. At the that time, they did not have brain scans, so they measured sweat gland activity, literally looking at how much a white person would sweat when a Black person came to the room. This is the motivation behind the neuroscience of racism, to measure something that might not be detectable with the bare eye or based on a person's self-identification. The point is not to essentialise racism, rather, it's about adding another layer of reality that can either confirm or contradict the other approach you spoke about. I also apply a Marxist analysis to determine in which power relations of inequality our brains stand to each other. Although racism is never excusable, it can do significantly more harm if someone with a lot of political and socio-economic power does it. That's why I propose that our public representatives have a special neuropolitical duty to humanise others. That's what needs to be tackled first. Also, if our socially evolved brains all have the capacity to dehumanise, and we might not be able to eradicate it fully, we need to learn how to become autonomous agents of our own brains, how to regulate and manage our dehumanisation capacities.

Ting-Fai: As a cultural studies scholar, I'm interested in the role of situatedness in knowledge production. As we are now doing this interview in Taipei, where you wrote part of the book, I cannot help but wonder whether Taiwan and its surrounding geopolitics have in any way shaped your theorization.

Liya: I came to Taiwan at a strange and surreal time, during the pandemic. I felt very safe here, and at the same time, of course, feeling Taiwan's threatened existence next to a hostile, aggressive neighbour. I witnessed how Taiwanese people were excluded internationally, not just in terms of political bodies like the UN and the World Health Organization, but within a global imagination of what it means to be human.

As a German philosopher with Asian immigrant roots myself, I have always said Taiwan needs to insert itself into a global dialectic discourse of what it means to be a democracy and what it means to be human. Otherwise, people will not care about or defend Taiwan. It's a neuropolitical argument I am making: other people's brains will not care if Taiwan is attacked, if they don't see Taiwanese needs as fully human. You literally use more cognitive resources, and you use your brain in a much more intensive way when you are able to imagine: What are somebody's fears in their life? What are their aspirations? What are their dreams? What are they thinking now? This is part of how we define humanisation. The social psychology and neuroscience of dehumanisation originated in feminist social psychology, which looked into the objectification and dehumanization of women.

So when I was writing the book in Taiwan, I cared very much about the strength and survival of Taiwan's democracy: How can Taiwan survive, not just on this pragmatic level, but really from a neuropolitical and philosophical viewpoint? The argument I'm making is also connected to the human rights debate in important ways. If non-western authoritarian countries, such as China, reject human rights because they claim it's a Western concept, I would counter to that that our brains actually have a very acute need to be included, as part of a basic neuro-based need. Cultural relativism arguments don't hold in light of my neuropolitical argument of humanisation. That's why to me this is a powerful rebuke to those instrumentally deployed culturalist arguments made by authoritarian regimes.

Ting-Fai: Like many readers, I am intrigued by your book's approach to linking neuropolitics and the study of racism, despite the marginalisation of neuropolitical analysis in critical race theory, and vice versa. What advice would you give scholars, especially those early-career and emerging, who work across disciplines and theoretical conventions?

Liya: I have had extraordinary young people come up to me and say: How can I pursue the neuropolitical approach for my field? One of the most special people who had come up to me recently was a Russian student who fled Russia as an asylum seeker because she was against

the war. She was a political science student back in Russia and unsuccessfully tried to pursue her neuropolitical interests, discouraged by her professors. Once she got out of Russia, she read my book and she didn't feel gaslit anymore.

The first thing you need to tell anybody who doesn't believe in brain science out of fears of reductionism or determinism is that brain data is not ontological data. It does not tell us who we are as human beings. It only tells us what our brains do. I think all of us who have experienced racism know very much how words can hide racism. How implicit biases and discriminatory behaviour can lie through beautiful words and theories. So, I basically see the question of equality as one that has to radically include all these layers of reality. I usually tell early career scholars that they need to get good at brain science. There's some questionable work out there that uses neuroscience as a fancy additive, as an attention catcher.

As a serious German, I have never operated in this way. I believe in theorising from the ground up, so I've never used the data as an add-on to some speculative, subjective theory about human nature. And I do criticise a lot of political theory for just using the author's speculative scopes of how people will include each other and what they might want from each other, from Martha Nussbaum to John Rawls and their ideas of when people include each other. In my book, I'm not claiming too much. I'm just saying that there is a reality of dehumanisation that we can detect at the brain level, and it might sometimes be counterintuitive to our current theories on racism.

Ting-Fai: The last question. One of the reasons why we are intellectually brought together, I suppose, is because our personal histories are similarly marked by mobility and cultural displacements. As members of the global Chinese diaspora, the questions of exclusion and dehumanisation are, in many ways, autobiographical. What historical and contemporary examples best inform our critical interventions as a minority group?

Liya: I think for people like us, two very profound experiences often mark our life experiences. The first is rage, and the second is a yearning to heal. To me, a neuropolitical theory answers that rage. Because the kind of radical exclusion that people like us have experienced can only be remedied by radical inclusion. We can't just be contented with sitting at the periphery of a global discourse on what it means to be human.

My book represents a refusal to do so. It asks for a radical universal inclusion through the brain. What drove me to study politics in the first place was this rage. I was initially an artist; I wrote literature. Even as a teenager, I knew from within my bones I had experienced deep humiliation as an Asian woman growing up in Germany and that any art I created would be futile if there were not first a radical political equality that would include my body. I've done that through neuropolitical theory, so I now do literature and performance art to heal.

For people like us who have experienced so much rage, we often ask ourselves: What's the point of living? There are many possibilities for intercultural identity, but there's also a lot of darkness: displacement, homelessness, and isolation. We need a reason to live, and that, to me, comes through creation which is art. We meet that rage, but we need to heal. This is where my neuropolitical theory is situated, in that nexus between enlightened autonomy to overcome inequality, and creative autonomy to generate a new dignity for ourselves.

Ting-Fai: There cannot be a more perfect way to end the interview. Thank you, Liya!