



A BIRTH IN BERLIN  
LEOR ZMIGROD

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Leor Zmigrod completed her BA and PhD in Psychology at Cambridge University as a Gates Scholar and won a prestigious Junior Research Fellowship at Churchill College, Cambridge to develop an independent research program on the cognitive roots of ideological convictions. Leor Zmigrod's research focuses on the neurocognitive origins and consequences of ideological thinking, blending methods from cognitive psychology, political science, and neuroscience. She has held visiting fellowships at Stanford University, Harvard University, and the Paris Institute of Advanced Study as the Gretty Mirdal Junior Chair in "Brain, Culture, and Society." Her book, *The Ideological Brain*, will be published at the start of 2025. – E-mail: leor.zmigrod@gmail.com.

It was the sense of space that struck me first – and that is likely to linger in my memory and my work for the longest time. I'm sure it will fade last. The wide white desk that greeted me on arrival, the grand windows overlooking the quiet silver lake hugged by majestic trees – all this white space and white light were like a blank page. A blank page that I did not know I had been waiting for until I arrived in Berlin on a crisp and sunny September morning.

Writing a book always felt on the horizon, but the horizon is generally far, slippery, and out of reach. Writing a book is not a celebrated endeavour in my field – unlike in philosophy or history or other disciplines, experimental psychologists rarely write full-length books. And the book I had in mind was not one that departmental committees would easily digest or commend; I wanted it to be a book that could speak to the intersection of psychology, politics, neuroscience, and philosophy, a book that could be read by

multiple audiences and say something provocative to each of them, a book that I would love to write and – if miraculously written by someone else – love to read.

To my amazement and gratitude, when I arrived in Berlin, I immediately started writing. It was so immediate and so fluent that I had to stop attending my intensive German course halfway through, to my language tutor's dismay and my mix of shame and delight. In the years before Berlin, I would go through cycles of sketching the book out and starting fragments and then putting it aside when other academic commitments called. There was something liberating about Wiko's intellectual and physical space. Wiko advertises its freedom with a hushed glee, but it is coy about the sheer beauty of the space and how it teaches you to move – breath, cycle, run, amble, think, critique – in new ways.

As warm September melted into the icy sheets covering December, my book *The Ideological Brain* was born. It was a furious and untameable birth, and I'm grateful for my fellow Fellows and the wonderful Wiko staff for accommodating and attending to me so patiently and lovingly during the process. In the six months between September to March, I wrote over half the book and created a book proposal for publishers. A month after leaving Berlin, the book was bought by the Viking imprint of Penguin Random House and Holt of Macmillan – as well as by the publishers of more than 10 translation languages, including German (Suhrkamp), French (Flammarion), Italian (Rizzoli), Spanish (Paidós), Hebrew (Kinneret), Japanese (Toya Kezai), and others. The reception of the book has been beyond my wildest dreams, and I'm grateful for Wiko for the space to realize them.

*The Ideological Brain* hopes to elucidate how ideologies coerce human brains, and how we can unchain our minds from toxic dogmas. Melding psychology, politics, and philosophy, the book seeks to reveal how believing passionately in a rigid doctrine is a process that spills into our neurons, flowing into our bodies. Ideologies are not mere envelopes for our lives; they *enter* our skins, our skulls, our nerve cells. The book will offer evidence that totalizing ideologies shape the brain as a whole, not simply the brain when it is confronted with political propositions or debates. Science now reveals that the profound reverberations of ideologies can be observed in the brain even when we are not thinking about politics at all. There is therefore a danger that when individuals are immersed in rigid ideologies, it is not only their *political* opinions and *moral* tastes that are being sculpted – their entire brains are being sculpted too. The book will also uncover why not all brains are equally susceptible to the tyrannical logic of ideologies; why not all brains

embrace rigidity. The clues lie in our cells, our bodies, our personal histories. Since our brains learn to embody ideological indoctrination easily, and terribly quickly, social rituals can become biological realities.

History's most influential political thinkers hypothesized that ideologies render human minds "thoughtless," hollow and incapable of independent reflection or judgment. The true believer is "mindless," claimed the famous theorist Hannah Arendt. Indeed, as noted earlier, it is tempting – and convenient – to invoke metaphors of emptiness to describe the brainwashed and the misled. *Fools and empty-headed fanatics!*

Yet, I argue in the book, the new field of political neuroscience shows that such explanations are wrong and, more problematically, dangerous. A mindless mind cannot be held to account. A mindless mind is not responsible for its lies and fabrications, for its misbehaviour or confabulations, for its harassments and its crimes. Mindlessness is not a mechanism we can measure or assess, and it distracts us from the quest for a scientific explanation of how minds are altered by deep immersion in totalizing ideologies. The task is now to trace the precise distortions that happen when human brains internalize rigid doctrines and to identify the consequences for our biological bodies as well as for our political bodies.

This book is not a classic treatise about polarization or the decline of reason and society's takeover by demagogues. The book conveys a more subtle and radical message: that our politics are not superficial – politics can become cellular.

Building an argument that harnesses the political sciences and the biological sciences is wonderfully Wiko-esque, and I'm deeply grateful for the words of encouragement and confidence from the Fellows and Wiko staff that have allowed me to stretch in these interdisciplinary directions.

It is difficult for me to imagine writing this book anywhere outside Berlin. Berlin, for me, was a city of contradictions and dualities. A city made of the tensions necessary for creative eruptions. It was also the perfect place to think and write about ideologies. Berlin's tumultuous history is written onto every pavement – as one of my Wiko colleagues mentioned, blood seeps out between the cracks of every brick – and the ideological frictions are still evident today in the simultaneous forms of radical openness and conservative impulses that sit together in Berlin, side by side, delineating and carving out the city.

I will always be thankful for the freedom, the view of the lake from my desk as the seasons changed, and the atmosphere at Wiko that allowed me to write this long-dreamed-about book. I hope that the Wissenschaftskolleg continues to offer its junior

fellowship program at the College for Life Sciences, which has been life-changing, career-affirming, and immensely stimulating. The Wiko Junior Fellows are treated with equal seriousness and equal interest as the Senior Fellows, and I hope the institute will continue to nurture younger scholars for whom this opportunity is an unparalleled way to take genuine risks. It certainly allowed me to develop my voice and craft as a writer as well as a thinker and empirical scientist. After a long gestation period, the book was truly born in Berlin – and I hope the resonances with the city and the institute will be clear when it sits on bookshelves, especially the ones in the magnificent Wiko library.