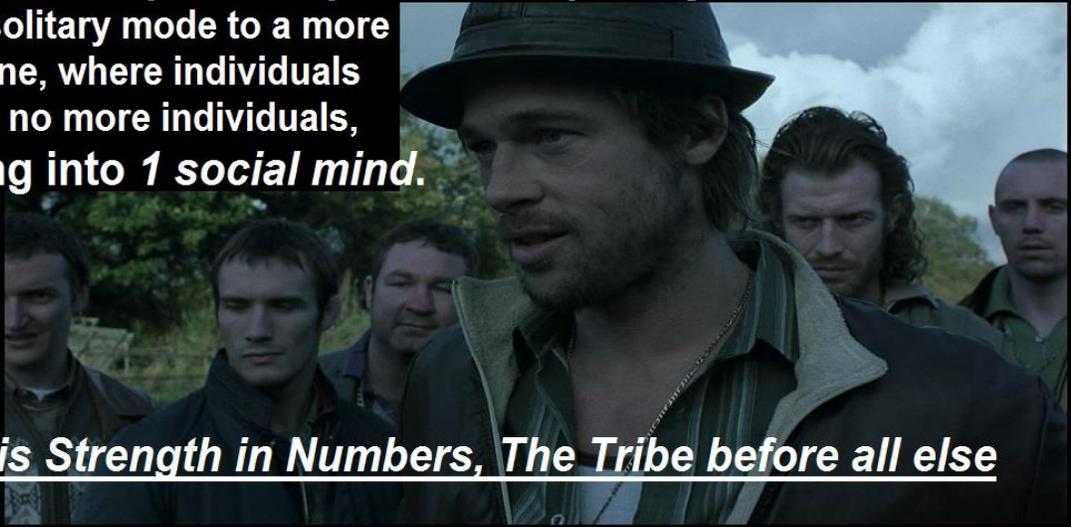


Tribal Instinct

Tribalism is instinctive; it's an innate behavior most of us have. Nature taught us to live in groups, and fight, kill and die for those groups. Our body chemistry automatically changes when we move from a solitary mode to a more social one, where individuals become no more individuals, merging into ***1 social mind***.



There is Strength in Numbers, The Tribe before all else



How Tribalism Overrides Reason, and Makes Risky Times More Dangerous

When I was a kid, my synagogue was right across the street from a Catholic church. Bellevue Avenue made such a clear dividing line between *us* – The Chosen People – and *them*...the enemy. No doubt the view from the other side of the street was the same. I had no idea at the time what a powerful metaphor those few lanes of asphalt made for one of the most significant aspects of human behavior...the powerful instinct of tribalism. It's everywhere, protecting us by readily overriding reason, and morality, and pretty much anything else that could dim our chances of survival. And it's threatening us at the same time.

Maybe you read about [one recent manifestation](#) in The New York Times, about the Orthodox Jews of the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn who shunned a neighbor after he told police about a man – a fellow Jew - who was sexually abusing his son. You'd think that a father protecting his son would be the sort of behavior that would be honored. Nope. Not if it is disloyal to the tribe.

That's the synagogue side of the street. How about the long loathsome record of Catholic Church authorities abandoning their morals and forfeiting the safety of vulnerable children by covering up, ignoring, or denying extensive evidence of child abuse by a small number of priests. Same thing. Tribe first. Morals second.

It's not just religion, of course. We identify ourselves as members of all sorts of tribes; our families, political parties, race, gender, social organizations. We even identify tribally just based on where we live. Go Celtics, go Red Sox, go U.S. Olympic team! One study asked people whether, if they had a fatal disease, would they prefer a life-saving diagnosis from a computer that was 1,000 miles away, or the exact same diagnosis from a computer in their town, and a large majority preferred the same information if the source...a machine...was local.

Tribalism is pervasive, and it controls a lot of our behavior, readily overriding reason. Think of the inhuman things we do in the name of tribal unity. Wars are essentially, and often quite specifically, tribalism. Genocides are tribalism - wipe out the other group to keep our group safe – taken to madness. Racism that lets us feel that our tribe is better than *theirs*, parents who end contact with their own children when they dare marry someone of a *different* faith or color, denial of evolution or climate change or other basic scientific truths when they challenge tribal beliefs. What stunning evidence of the power of tribalism! (By the way, it wasn't just [geocentrist](#) Catholics in the 16 and 1700s who denied evidence that the earth travels around the sun. Some Christian biblical literalists still do. So do a handful of ultra orthodox Jews and Muslims.)

Yet another example is the polarized way we argue about so many issues, and the incredible irony that as we make these arguments we claim to be intelligent (smart, therefore right) yet

we ignorantly close our minds to views that conflict with ours. Dan Kahan, principal researcher into the phenomenon of [Cultural Cognition](#), has found that our views are powerfully shaped so they agree with beliefs of the groups with which we most strongly identify. His research, along with the work of others, has also found that the more challenged our views are, the more we defend them...the more dogmatic and closed-minded we become...an intellectual form of 'circle-the-wagons, we're under attack' tribal unity. Talk about tribalism overruling reason.

As irrational as genocide and science denial and immorality may be, it makes absolute sense that tribalism can produce such behaviors. We are social animals. We have evolved to depend on our tribes, literally, for our safety and survival. As Jane Howard, biographer of anthropologist Margaret Mead, put it "Call it a clan, call it a network, call it a tribe, call it a family: Whatever you call it, whoever you are, you need one." We may not be aware at the conscious level of the influence tribalism has on us, but then, most of human cognition happens below the radar of consciousness, and is driven not so much by the goal of getting good grades or winning Nobel Prizes as it is, first, to survive. Small wonder that this ultimate imperative dominates so much of how we behave, how we think and act, and how we treat each other. And it's hardly surprising that the more unsettled and uncertain we feel and the less we feel we have control over how things are going - feelings that make us feel threatened - the more we circle the wagons and fiercely fight for tribal success, looking to the tribe to keep us safe.

It's a sobering reflection on this inherent but potentially destructive aspect of human nature, in these unsettled and threateningly uncertain times.

Tribalism is instinctive; it's an innate behavior we are born with. Only afterwards it begins to take different forms we learn from society as we grow up.

Nature taught us to live in groups, and fight, kill and die for those groups. Our body chemistry automatically changes when we move from a solitary mode to a social one, where individuals become no more individuals, merging into *one* individual. **Oxytocin and vasopressin**, the social hormones, naturally make us relax, trust and sympathize with those we are more familiar with, than those we are not, to easily mesh together.

Tribalism is more than a herd instinct, imprinted in Hominids over ages of evolution and still driving their behavior. It bonds them in groups, for more power, diversity and organization; but it's also the prime cause of "discrimination" in any form it has: sexism, racism, ageism, nepotism, lookism, speciesism, etc., which are but variations on the theme of *mindless* favoritism.

Favoritism is justified when it's rational, based on real differences between people affecting their mutual interests, not based on looks, race, gender, and personal beliefs and tastes.

Understanding human tribal instinct spares us many irrational acts committed in the name of "love, loyalty, honor, altruism, patriotism, tradition, etiquette and conformity," merely motivated by a compulsive urge needing to be curbed and refined. Those who like to help, live or *die* for others may reconsider their choice if they clearly see the instinctive motive behind their action.

Dying for someone or to defend a cause is a noble act, but it's optional. Death is not preferred under most circumstances, and those praising human sacrifice (the few for the many, minority for majority, individual for group/sect/family/tribe/state) calling it heroism or martyrdom, might not call it so if they knew it merely comes down to chemistry sometimes (or if they were to die themselves). Nobody promptly seeks death unless they are *unconscious* of the price they pay, while under the influence of a drug, an obsessive idea, or a mindless instinct driving them to their end: eating, mating, fighting, or bonding tribal instinct.

Causes of Discrimination

"We follow instinct when we fail to use reason." Following our tribal instinct leads to discrimination gradually making us biased against any group/tribe of society we consider different from ours. There are some contexts helping such latent instinct bloom and flourish. It's better to avoid those contexts that set the animal in us loose, than to blame the former for our *willfully* wrong actions.

- *Personality*. Lack of reasoning, calmness and self-control, causing a person to choose passion over reason, especially when accompanied by lack of intelligence already.
- *Experience*.
 - Not living with those discriminated against before.
 - Not being discriminated against oneself.
 - Not being busy and satisfied with one's own life, to live and let others live.
- *Laws*. Following or fearing to break or change man-made discriminatory laws.
- *Beliefs*. Wrongly applying texts written in different time and place, missing the core of ethics by dwelling on its surface, ironically resulting in totally irreligious/unethical acts.
- *Traditions*. Conforming to society's norms (following the herd), which is much easier than being oneself (choosing one's own path), resulting in disrespect for the difference and space between people: what's mine & what's yours. Tribe-wise, all I have is yours and all you have is mine, except when you are the head, or close to, where you receive extra benefits.
- *Education*. Lack of basic education about human and animal biology, psychology and sociology: learning about other species and other people—their races, cultures, beliefs, environment ...
- *Media*. Following media blindly without knowing who control it and their motivation, and without having basic education or alternative sources of information.

- *Upbringing.* Family is the smallest tribe and root of all tribes, and evils sometimes. Family members are naturally biased toward each other and against outsiders. The more insecure society is, the stronger family bonds are needed. However, in civilized societies, family role should gradually decrease, while the state role increase, to fully protect citizens from birth to death.

Types of Discrimination

There are endless forms of tribal behavior, since new forms develop everyday, as well as new terms coined. We have only recently noticed those new forms along with the already existing ones, because communication allowed different groups of people to live together, with characters and needs conflicting with one another. It has also allowed people to identify themselves differently, as they discover and learn more about *themselves*, which makes such conflicts even more complex.

Rather than opting for instinct to solve our present problems with, more time should be allowed for reasoning and learning about other people's differences, to avoid future problems as well.

- **Fanaticism** is caused by following tribal instinct without reasoning. All fanatics, in religion, sport, arts ... do not reason with what they are passionate about. Over time, like with any addiction, they lose control over their actions; then, like with any body disease, the brain too becomes damaged by fanaticism/extremism, of individuals or whole nations.

- **Sexism** is common among individuals and whole "patriarchal" societies, where there is a lack of understanding of gender similarities, which are less visible than gender differences that we instinctively respond to like animals. For the same reason, it's easy to understand why there is discrimination against homosexuals, bisexuals, transgenders ... and disrespect for jobs/sports/arts transcending gender differences. Other than ignorance about gender differences, there are other causes of sexism:

- Overestimating physical characters with mostly obsolete evolutionary functions.
- Getting more advantages if living in a sexist society.
- Confusing sexism with "sexiness," thinking the former a must for the latter (sexy = masculine/feminine). Thankfully, many people are gradually relinquishing some of the stereotypical preferences, for the sake of convenience, practicality, health, matching, appearance, and better sex.

- **Chauvinism** is a form of nation-wide tribalism, or collective dignity: a national self-image every good citizen must protect. It increases for different reasons or variations on the aforementioned causes of discrimination:

- Emotional *attachment* to a place, mostly where an individual grew up, can make them chauvinistic, irrationally loving a country/language/culture and hating another and the people from it.
- It can be caused by one's present *interests*, when they put an overly high value on the place where they live, just because they can't leave it, not because it deserves such value.
- Mostly, chauvinism is caused by *ignorance* of other countries and cultures.

Chauvinism can lead whole nations into wars, physical and verbal, taking revenge on one another for nonexistent reasons, where many lives are lost. It leads to discrimination against immigrants, foreigners ... even when the latter are vitally needed. Also, within the same country, people may discriminate against those from other country parts.

Even patriotism, or healthy chauvinism, a traditionally positive term, is gradually losing its meaning, as communication is increasing and borders between countries disappearing. Many people like to identify themselves as Earth citizens, directing their loyalty towards the planet all humans share, by trying to solve the problems affecting its inhabitants.

Ironically, most of the world's national anthems and songs need to be revised, as they include parts flagrantly inciting discrimination and violence, let alone illogically binding people to a single place on Earth, away from which they are doomed to suffer, if not perish. Suffice it to keep the lines expressing one's appreciation of their good memories in their birthplace, or wherever they grew up. It's the leaders of those nations who enjoy most hearing such songs, because it makes their subjects meeker, hence their ruling easier and longer. Chauvinism is a dumb idol worshiped by dumb worshipers, mostly created by self-interested politicians who need "human sacrifices" from time to time, whenever he—the idol or ruler—is angry, in a bad mood, or in a mood for killing some citizens.

