The Madness Of Humanity Part 3: Tribalism
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2016

In this essay, which is the third part in a series exploring different facets of humanity, Marcelo Gleiser discusses how tribalism plays a role in our society today. Tribalism, as Gleiser defines it in his text, involves the sense of loyalty and belonging that members of a group feel for their group. Gleiser provides a variety of examples for how we view tribalism and the roles it plays in our society today. As you read, identify and analyze the positive and negative effects that tribalism has on society.

On March 23, 1998, in San Diego, Calif., 39 members of the Heaven's Gate sect\(^1\) willfully committed suicide.

Their cue, as interpreted by their leader “Do,” was the closest approach of the comet Hale-Bopp to Earth. Members of Heaven's Gate believed that an unidentified point of light trailing the comet was a long-awaited redeeming UFO, transporting aliens that would transfer them to a purely spiritual plane of existence. The point of light was later identified as the star SAO 141894.

History is filled with similar examples of apocalypticsects whose members chose death over life, some peaceful and others extremely aggressive to anyone who doesn't “belong.”

“Belonging” is a key word here. It has its origins in our tribal past, when groups of individuals would struggle and fight for survival in adverse\(^2\) environmental conditions. To belong to the tribe meant protection from outside aggressors and an immediate sense of identity. I am part of a group that shares my values. Being part of this group makes me strong. Those who are not part of my group, that don't share my values, are a threat. They are the enemy. If we don't destroy them, they will destroy us. We, thus, must convert others to our value system\(^3\) or, if that fails, destroy them by any means available.

1. A sect is a group of people with somewhat different religious beliefs from those of a larger group to which they belong.
2. **Adverse (adjective):** preventing success or development; harmful
3. the system of established values, norms, or goals existing in a society
There are gradations\(^4\) of tribalism, of course. Only the most extreme would adopt the those-who-don't-belong-are-enemies value system, and only the most aggressive within these will opt to destroy their opponents. Most tribes actually feed on each other's strength and motivation to pursue a common goal. In his recent book *Tribe*, Sebastian Junger argues for the importance of such socially-bonding values, citing the detribalization of modern life as a cause for our current social and political misdirection. Tribalism can play a positive role in society and has been key to our survival.

However, taken to its extreme, tribalism is divisive,\(^5\) prejudiced, small-minded, and, as we see every day in the news, deadly.

Anthropologist\(^6\) Scott Atran, director of the Institute Jean Nicod in Paris, and from the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, has been studying radical Islamic movements for years. In particular, Atran is interested in what makes peaceful and mostly non-religious young people leave their countries and families to join violent organizations such as the Islamic State.\(^7\) Atran's arguments resonate with the attraction of extreme tribal behavior mentioned above: Young people adrift in a globalized world go to ISIS and other extreme movements seeking a shared identity that gives their lives a sense of meaning and purpose.

“The rise of the Islamic State is a revolutionary movement of historic proportions. Many of its members are devoted actors with an apocalyptic belief that they must destroy the world to save it,” said Atran, as quoted by Bruce Bower in Science News.

Most extreme tribal behavior springs from a perceived threat to what the group believes are sacred values or beliefs. “Sacred” here doesn’t necessarily imply religious values: “Secularized sacred,” as Atran refers to it, can play a key role as well, as in political notions of “human rights” or in ideologies that attempt to save “humanity” through political revolution (socialism, anarchism, communism, fascism, etc.)

There is a paradox\(^8\) here, as we humans need to belong. We are social animals, and being part of an identifying group is essential to a healthy emotional life. We experiment with such tribal behaviors all the time, from cliques in junior high school to sports fans with painted faces. Sometimes, such experiments get heavy — and violence erupts. Growing up in Brazil, I remember as a kid how ferociously I defended my local soccer team. Anyone who didn't support my team was at least suspicious, if not plain mad. How could their value system be sound if they chose to support another team? And how different is this from the current polarized behavior during this election season? Different tribes, with different value systems, vying\(^9\) for power.

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4. **Gradation (noun):** a scale or series of successive changes, stages, or degrees
5. **Divisive (adjective):** tending to cause disagreement or hostility between people
6. **Anthropologist:** a person who studies the origin, development, and varieties of human beings and their societies
7. **Extreme militant group**
8. **Paradox (noun):** a seemingly self-contradictory statement that, when investigated or explained, may prove to be well founded or true
9. **Vie (verb):** to compete eagerly with someone in order to do or achieve something
Tribalism is deeply ingrained in our value system. There's no way out of it. We need it; we love it; we hate it. What leads to extreme behavior, however, is something else. Extreme behavior comes from a radicalized sense of belonging, a desperate attachment to a single-minded goal that causes a short-sightedness of the “other.” Extreme behavior is inward-looking, intolerant, unwilling to grow, to look out. The need to belong trumps any other value system, even the value of one’s own life. Leaders feed on the devotion of their followers; followers feed on the devotion to their leader and the cause he or she represents.

After millennia of agrarian civilization, we remain morally stuck in our tribal behavior. Buddhists talk of detachment as the way to inner peace, that the root of all ill comes from our attachment to things, to values, to people. This is a hard lesson to learn for most of us, but if we connect a level of detachment to openness we may have a chance to move on.

We can commit to goals without radicalizing them, to support groups without demonizing others; we can follow value systems without closing off to different choices that others make. Red Sox or NY Yankees, we all share the same playing field.

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Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following identifies the central idea of the text? [RI.2]
   A. Tribalism has an overwhelmingly negative effect on modern society due to the way it promotes the need for tribes to expand their influence into other tribes.
   B. Tribalism is a necessary part of modern society. However, the extreme behavior that it can promote must be combatted in order for it to play a productive role in society.
   C. Tribalism was necessary in order for humans to survive in groups in the past. However, it does not play a productive role in society today.
   D. Tribalism plays an overwhelmingly positive role in modern society, and there are relatively few who use it as an excuse for violence.

2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
   A. “History is filled with similar examples of apocalyptic sects whose members chose death over life, some peaceful and others extremely aggressive to anyone who doesn’t ‘belong.’” (Paragraph 4)
   B. “‘Belonging’ is a key word here. It has its origins in our tribal past, when groups of individuals would struggle and fight for survival in adverse environmental conditions.” (Paragraph 5)
   C. “Young people adrift in a globalized world go to ISIS and other extreme movements seeking a shared identity that gives their lives a sense of meaning and purpose.” (Paragraph 8)
   D. “Tribalism is deeply ingrained in our value system. There’s no way out of it. We need it; we love it; we hate it. What leads to extreme behavior, however, is something else.” (Paragraph 12)

3. PART A: How does paragraph 11 contribute to the development of ideas in the text? [RI.5]
   A. It provides more relatable examples of tribalism, as well the author’s own experiences.
   B. It proves that there is no way to escape the extreme behavior that tribalism promotes.
   C. It shows that tribalism is merely a phase in life that everyone must experience, but then move on from.
   D. It shows how only very few people are vulnerable to the extreme behavior that tribalism can evoke.

4. PART B: Which quote from paragraph 11 best supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
   A. “We are social animals, and being part of an identifying group is essential to a healthy emotional life.”
   B. “Sometimes, such experiments get heavy — and violence erupts.”
   C. “Growing up in Brazil, I remember as a kid how ferociously I defended my local soccer team. Anyone who didn’t support my team was at least suspicious, if not plain mad.”
   D. “Different tribes, with different value systems, vying for power.”
5. How do the advantages of tribalism compare to the disadvantages? [RI.3]
Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. How have you experienced a form of a tribalism? What was your value system and how did it feel to share it with others?

2. In the context of the text, why do people follow the crowd? Why does tribalism compel some people to join extreme groups? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.

3. In the context of the text, why do people do bad things? Why do people sometimes commit acts of violence for their cause or to spread their system of values? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.

4. In the context of the text, how can we achieve peace? How does the author suggest we promote aspects of tribalism that benefit our society?

5. In the context of this text, how are communities formed? Do you think the ways mentioned in the article are sustainable forms of community? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.