



The Roots of Society-Destroying Tribalism

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Received: 📅 December 20, 2019

Published: 📅 January 07, 2020

Opinion

Self-serving “our way or the highway” Tribalism is a ruinous societal malady that results in racial discrimination, xenophobia, religious prejudice, gender discrimination and even the distrust some harbor for arcane college professors and their so-called “hidden knowledge.”

All know its destructive impact, in the U.S. sought to be offset by voter rights legislation, Title IX strictures, public education and the like.

But is it enough to deal piecemeal with the results and ignore their cause? Perhaps if we understood the roots of the sickness, we might better remedy its symptoms.

My notion is that Tribalism is innate in human beings, a genetically determined trait of *Homo sapiens*. In a 2019 essay in the Washington Post Sebastian Junger argued that political polarization is inbred. To me, the impact of such underpinning seems far broader.

Tribalism, like any trait shared by disparate societies worldwide having differing cultures, traditions and histories cannot be solely “cultural.” That, then, implicates genetics, a sensible idea given that all humans, regardless of their heritage, are 99.9% genetically identical. And the malady is exceedingly difficult to eradicate. There are countless examples of differing peoples living side-by-side only to be torn apart by a reprise of earlier Tribalistic conflicts – for example, the “ethnic cleansing” that accompanied the 1990s dissolution of Yugoslavia and today, in the U.S. and Europe, fear and rejection of immigrants and the resurgence of White Supremacy.

That such conflicts arise repeatedly shows they are deep seated. The cultures evolved but the underpinnings of the conflict subconsciously festered. The gene-based thesis explains their resurgence time and again.

Why do humans harbor such genetics? Blame it on our hunter-gatherer ancestors for whom such genes were advantageous, not deleterious. Present 450,000 years ago in Neanderthals, with whom we share about 2% of our genes, Tribalism was crucial to survival when alien bands encroached their territory.

The Neanderthals, in turn, acquired the trait from their ancestors, such as Chimpanzees with which we share some 97% of total DNA and primates that protect their land, food, and tribe as do humans by fighting-off foraging intruders.

In 12,000 BCE, the onset of the Agricultural Revolution, domesticated crops provided food for larger multi-tribe populations. This was advantageous, replacing the uncertain results of day-to-day foraging. Conflict was suppressed but the enclaves were ridden by disease and plagued by the arcane art of crop production.

Over time, religion came to play a role in offsetting Tribalism. Neanderthals had notions of “life-hereafter” – why else would they bury their dead sprinkled with bright red mineral dust and enshrouded in flowers? Though in the following millennia numerous such traditions arose, global population remained small and no single religion rose to dominance.

By 1,000 BCE, populations expanded, in the Western World especially surrounding the Mediterranean where the cardinal impetus in counteracting Tribalism was the rise of Judaism (700 BCE) and its derivatives, Christianity (1st Century CE) and Islam (700 CE). These new monotheistic belief systems promoted a “group-first” rather than a “me-first” ethic (embodied in the Golden Rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”).

Some may imagine that if Tribalism is genetically embedded it is uncorrectable. They would be mistaken. There are numerous examples of societal norms (“nurture”) overriding genetically embedded predilections (“nature”).

Consider child molestation by Roman Catholic priests. Being human males, their sexual urges have a genetic underpinning. But those unable to control such impulses comprise a small minority (about 4%). The great majority of Catholic clergy, some 96%, adhere to the rules.

Offsetting Tribalism matters. Our country is a scant 243 years old, and though our democratic “American Experiment” is envied worldwide we have been beset by Tribalism, most notably racism and xenophobia. Given that each and every one of us is an immigrant

– or the offspring of immigrants – this history is embarrassingly self-defeating. What can we do?

- a) Be aware that Tribalism is deep seated and societally pervasive – and protect yourself from falling prey to its ills.
- b) Be a “group person,” not a “me-firster.” Of course, be supportive and considerate of your family, friends and colleagues.

But, importantly, be the same to people who do not look like you or differ from you by their backgrounds, cultures, histories, and belief systems. In other words, practice the Golden Rule.

This is our home, our society, our country and we each have a vested interest in helping it be better. By its nature our democracy strides three steps forward then stumbles two steps back. Yet the small steps forward add-up. Have confidence!

Look at our history – we’ve “been there, done that.” A little more than a half-century ago landing a human on the Moon was said to be “impossible,” “out of the question,” “ridiculous.” Despite the naysayers we succeeded, not just for ourselves but “for all mankind.” As our society has shown time and again, the shared goals and values of this country can and will prevail!



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DOI: [10.32474/JAAS.2020.01.000111](https://doi.org/10.32474/JAAS.2020.01.000111)



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