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Are Our Politics Really "Tribal"?

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Amy Chua's new book mischaracterizes American politics and perpetuates stereotypes of tribal societies.

Political Tribes: Group Instinct and the Fate of Nations
Amy Chua
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In the West, stories begin: "Once upon a time." Farther east, they begin: "It was—and it was not." After engaging with her argument, the reader may wonder which opening would have been more appropriate to the story Amy Chua has to tell.

At first blush Chua's story appears quite straightforward. From her first sentence, where she says that, "humans are tribal"—indeed (as she later emphasizes) "humans aren't just a little tribal. We're *very* tribal"—her point might seem unobjectionable, even trite. After all, humans gather, gregariously, in all sorts of combinations and, notwithstanding the temptation to be ethnocentric and competitive, "tribe" might simply be a cover term for any of these forms of human association. Chua, a Yale Law School professor, does not, however, leave it at that, since mere groupiness would hardly constitute a causal explanation for the current state of American politics. Instead, she goes on to imply that tribes always need "an enemy to hate and kill," that at its worst "tribalism desensitizes by dehumanizing," and that people always see their own tribe as superior to all others.

But what is the source of this prickly and exclusionary tribalism? For Chua the answer is firmly rooted in biology: Human beings, she argues, are the possessors of a biological "instinct"—a *tribal* instinct—that does not simply propel us into association with others of our kind but into groupings whose identifying features stand in agonistic relationship to other such cohorts. We are, in short, bound up in territorial and pugnacious "tribes" by the ineluctable forces of our psychic structure. Chua never defines "tribe" and is often inconsistent in

using it (what does it mean to use the word in quotes when referring to Britain?), but she does reveal her overall orientation by the sources on which she relies.

Chua's evidence for this biological urge rests initially on the work of two behavioral psychologists, Muzaraf Sharif and Robin Dunbar. Sharif's 1954 experiment, called the Robber's Cave, purported to show that groups come into conflict when competing for limited resources. But as Gina Perry in her book *The Lost Boys* and other scholars have shown, the groups used (consisting only of 12-year-old white boys) were artificial and the sampling biased, the experimenters themselves formed an opposing group, and in later experiments other lines of division showed up beyond those involving resource competition. Dunbar's claim—that, owing to our inbuilt cognitive limit, 150 is the number of individuals with whom any one person can maintain stable relationships—is equally questionable: Other experiments have produced varied numbers (such as the Bernard-Kilworth number, which is twice as large) and still others have shown the distortions that arise from completely ignoring the role that culture plays in group dynamics.

To these psychological experiments Chua then adds studies that seek human propensities through the use of brain scans. Here she treats the proffered results as proof of our species' disposition to coalesce into hostile groups when in fact most scientists understand that different regions of the brain may pick up different capabilities, that blood flow and attendant brightening may be inversely related to speed of learning, and that, because responses vary, more than biology is almost certainly involved. As at other moments in her account, Chua confuses contingency with causality. This is evident both in her overarching explanation of human nature and her appraisal of American foreign policies.

Chua's theory of the tribal instinct informs her view of the present moment in American domestic politics and misguided foreign policy. Her argument has two main branches. First, by not realizing that humans are essentially tribal, policymakers have missed the key lines of association that inform the politics of countries into whose affairs we have intruded in peace and in war. In addition, we have failed to grasp how much inequality exacerbates this tribal instinct. As to the latter, Chua says that "the key to understanding extremism lies . . . in *group inequality*."

But like her use of “tribalism,” Chua’s view of inequality is imprecise and inconsistently applied. Does she mean differences in wealth distribution, perceived favoritism for minorities based on other generations’ sins, or the sense of losing one’s prior control over the symbols of national identity? Several recent studies might at least have caught Chua’s attention. Some have demonstrated, for example, that fear of cultural displacement drove more people to vote for Trump than economic anxiety—though others question whether, in a nation in which 35 percent of people have savings of less than a few hundred dollars (and another 34 percent have none at all), culture could really be the source of collective anger. But Chua neither says which type of inequality she thinks is at issue nor precisely how it generates tribal exclusivity rather than useful alliances across other boundaries, such as ethnic differences between minority groups with similarly low incomes.

False premises may still produce true results, so the question is whether certain of Chua’s specific policy examples—her flawed theory of the tribal instinct aside—can nevertheless stand on their own. Yet even here inaccuracies and the questionable selection of facts can suggest quite different interpretations. She says that in Iraq things turned around for American forces when, in connection with the surge, we finally began to pay attention to the tribes. That is so and not so: It was the tribes, fed up with the behavior of foreign Muslim fighters, who, in the Anbar Awakening of 2006-7, began to play a key role. However, whether because of their antipathy to the foreign fighters or as the result of the power vacuum created at the tribal level by al-Qaeda’s ideological universalism, it was the tribes who came to us, not the other way around. More to the point, if tribes are so retrograde, why does Chua favor supporting tribes as a means of advancing political stability?

Similarly, in her account of Vietnam, where she uses the terms “tribal” and “ethnic” interchangeably, she rightly chastises policymakers for failing to appreciate how much the Vietnamese hated the Chinese. Nevertheless, she continues to rely on her underlying explanatory theory, now hedging by saying that brain scans “suggest” that group identification is innate rather than influenced by history. As for Venezuela, she again confutes causality by rightly pointing out Hugo Chávez’s appeal to groups of the poor, but failing to account for the lesser appeal of his successor, Nicolás Maduro, when exactly the same “tribal instincts” should have been at work. Elsewhere, Chua does mention the

importance of leadership, yet never addresses its relationship to the primordial instincts to which she otherwise gives causal precedence. Finally, in considering a broader series of examples, Chua attributes many problems in these countries to our failure to see that "market-dominant minorities," like the overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia, create opposing "tribes." But among such examples that she lists Chua strangely includes, without further comment, "Jews in post-Communist Russia."

Chua's vision of the United States is also a mix of concise summation and misleading appraisal. While criticizing American claims to uniqueness, Chua characterizes the United States as the only "super group," by which she seems to mean that we possess some of the same unifying features smaller groups display. But if we are breaking up into hostile identity polities, as she argues, how is it that Barack Obama was twice elected President? And if it is true that elections may actually galvanize mutual antipathy, what forestalls that result in certain instances? In her reference to super-groups and to the United States as a "tribe of tribes," Chua complicates her own theory of the tribal instinct, without sufficiently explaining how Americans sometimes overcome the tribal loyalties of their various subgroups, and sometimes do not. If we are exceptional, it is only, at best, intermittently.

It is true, in Chua's approach to politics as in so much of the history of science, that the story we use to fill in the blanks may actually shape what might otherwise seem a factual account that speaks for itself. Whether the theory in question is Jared Diamond's geographic determinism, Thomas Friedman's flattened world of technology, or the neurologists' universals glowing in the light of a brain scan, Americans have a weakness for supposedly holistic, seemingly objective, explanations. We quickly forget that at various times we have been Social Darwinians, then Freudians, then puppets of our DNA. But once one grasps that, in human affairs, contingency reigns over determinism, then globalism begins to seem like "globaloney," latitude is no longer seen as destiny, and the light at the end of the MRI flickers and grows dim.

Nor is Chua's tribal instinct thesis an innocuous metaphor. Now used by pundits like David Brooks, scientists like E.O. Wilson, and even the son of an anthropologist, Barack Obama—this metaphor has deleterious effects in at least three very important ways. Actual tribes are not, in fact, exclusionary and prone to violence. To the contrary, they are commonly open to outsiders, apply

numerous devices to limit conflict, and constantly intermarry, speak several languages, and experiment with the rituals and trade practices of other groups. Tribes do not like too much power in too few hands for too long a period of time, and hence deploy leveling strategies—ranging from subdividing leadership to employing jokes and avoidance behavior—to limit the potential accumulation of power. In addition, referring to our anger-filled politics as "tribal" continues a stereotype of real tribes that serves to justify their political oppression and the appropriation of many of their lands and resources.

So long as the powerful can portray the nearly 200 million tribal people of the planet living in over 70 countries as clannish, truculent, and anti-democratic, they can continue to deny these peoples a proper degree of sovereignty. And when we fallaciously claim that tribal identity is founded on an inherent human instinct, we perpetuate a vision of our fate as a regression to primordial features, risking precisely that sort of self-justifying and self-fulfilling prophecy that misguided claims to scientific truth have yielded far too often in the past.

But if we accept for a moment that such a thing as a tribal instinct exists and that it is, as the book's subtitle emphasizes, entwined with "the fate of nations," what then is to be done? Here, alas, Chua's epilogue betrays her own thesis twice over. A paean to American idealism, this valediction effectively denies her entire reliance on the tribal by claiming that interpersonal relationships coupled with American idealism can somehow overcome our intergroup hostility—this after arguing so strenuously that American idealism has not been an adequate prophylactic against tribalism. Since, ironically, real tribes engage in considerable face-to-face interaction of the sort she commends, perhaps Chua might have considered that tribalism is, in some sense, the solution more than it is the problem.

There is also a very American bias in Chua's account of our politics. Americans do not trust collectives: We do not think they are smarter than the individual, more creative than the lone thinker, more liberating than the heroic personality—all this notwithstanding our idealization of community. Herself the successful child of well-educated immigrant parents, a talented woman in a male-dominated world, and a "tiger mother" rigorous in the upbringing of her own daughters, Chua has imbibed the American sense of individualism as well as surrendered to that other very American lure—giving everything a purportedly scientific justification. The result, as for so many pundits of the

moment, is a considerable suspicion of groups, a perspective as misleading in its factual claims as it is incomplete in its policy directive.

"Once upon a time…It was and it was not": Perhaps the combination would not only have served as an appropriate opening to Chua's arguments but as a fitting summation. Tribes endure but tribalism is not some form of original sin, a human instinct that displaces culture and condemns us to a constant struggle against our basest selves. Indeed, if one were to rely on a more plausible theory, it would be that in the course of evolution humans replaced instinct with the capacity to create categories out of our own experience, which is what most anthropologists now mean by culture. But that theory would ill-suit Chua's dark interpretation of human nature and the fashionable way of characterizing American politics.

Ultimately, Chua's analysis is at once a fantastical myth of what happened once upon a time in human evolution and an incautious brew of what is so and what is not. At once obvious and misleading, self-evident and distorting, her assessment of our cultural moment, like her governing metaphor, recalls that statement by her fellow lawyer, Benjamin Cardozo, that "metaphors in law are to be narrowly watched, for starting as devices to liberate thought, they end often by enslaving it." Factionalism and an unequal access to power may have coarsened our politics. But the present trajectory of group politics neither arises from a tribal instinct nor descends to base animosity. After reading Chua's account one can only hope that a more accurate and kind-hearted metaphor may yet be slouching toward "our shining city upon a hill."

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