The Evolutionary Psychology and Neuroscience of Tribalism

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Center for Artifact Studies

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“Tribalism remains humankind's most dangerous instinct.”-- clinical psychologist Camilo Zacchia

Like many other animal species, human beings are innately social creatures. They evolved in small tribes where loyalty and solidarity were essential for survival. For most of history, small groups endured by trusting their own and treating outsiders with wariness, a strategy that helped protect resources, raise children, and ward off rivals.

At its core, tribalism is the impulse to divide the world into “us” and “them.” It is not only about finding comfort in community, but also about defining identity against outsiders.

As populations grew and societies became more complex, this instinct scaled up. What once applied to a few dozen kin and neighbors now fuels allegiance to vast political movements, religions, nations, ethnic groups, and online communities and fandoms.

These survival instincts remain embedded in the modern brain, where they fuel suspicion, rivalry, and the urge to see one’s own group as superior. Insiders are trusted and defended, while outsiders are distrusted, caricatured, and demonized.

The Neuroscience of Tribalism

Neuroscience shows how these instincts operate. The amygdala, an almond-shaped structure in the brain, activates more strongly when outsiders are seen, signaling potential threat. The brain’s reward system releases dopamine when a group succeeds, reinforcing loyalty. The medial prefrontal cortex responds more strongly to ingroup members, dulling empathy for outsiders. Oxytocin, the bonding hormone, strengthens trust within the group but also intensifies suspicion of strangers.

Tali Sharot, a professor of cognitive neuroscience and the director of the Affective Brain Lab at MIT, explains, “Our brains are not wired to seek truth. They are wired to help us survive.” Jonathan Haidt, a social psychology professor at New York University and author of the book *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and*

Religion, similarly writes that humans are “groupish” creatures, letting social identity override critical thinking.

These automatic processes help explain why tribalism is so hard to overcome and why tribes, from large to cliques, form in nearly every human environment. Group identity feels good, and outsiders trigger caution almost instantly.

Tribalism as a Cognitive Bias

Cognitive biases, such as the tribalistic tendency, are automatic and unconscious mental shortcuts that are important to human functioning and survival, but produce illusions and false beliefs.

Tribalism shapes how people interpret information. It pushes people to embrace ideas that flatter their group while rejecting facts that threaten it. Nuance gets lost, opponents appear as enemies, and inconvenient evidence is brushed aside. Loyalty replaces reasoning, leading to distorted judgment and the survival of bad ideas.

Arlie Hochschild, a sociologist at the University of California at Berkeley, observes that people often “filter reality through the lens of group loyalty,” interpreting facts to reinforce existing allegiances. Johns Hopkins University political scientist Bill Connolly writes, “Group identity shapes the way citizens perceive threats and opportunities, often overriding abstract reasoning.”

In his landmark 1951 book *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements*, political philosopher and social psychologist Eric Hoffer wrote that mass movements rely on the creation of enemies. Hatred, he argued, is often more psychologically important to a movement than hope. A common enemy binds people together and channels their frustrations outward.

Psychologists have shown how automatic this is. In Oxford University social psychologist Henri Tajfel’s 1970s experiments, people were randomly assigned to meaningless categories, and yet they still favored their assigned group and discriminated against non-members.

Politics as the New Tribal Identity

Political identity has become one of the most powerful social markers of the present era, rivaling religion, ethnicity, and race. As religion has declined in centrality for many, politics has increasingly filled that vacuum.

Lilliana Mason, a political science professor at Johns Hopkins University and author of *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity*, writes that “partisanship has

become a social identity. It is something akin to ethnicity and religion, more than a bundle of opinions about government."

For much of the 20th century, party affiliation was seen as a matter of policy preference. Today, being a Democrat or Republican, conservative or progressive, has become a core marker of selfhood, shaping not only voting habits but also friendships, cultural tastes, and even where people choose to live. Increasingly, people see the other party not merely as opponents but as morally suspect and even dangerous.

Shadi Hamid, a professor of Islamic Studies at Fuller Theological Seminary in California, writes: "American faith, it turns out, is as fervent as ever; it's just that what was once religious belief has now been channeled into political belief. Political debates over what America is supposed to mean have taken on the character of theological disputations. This is what religion without religion looks like."

Humans Swap One Tribe or Prejudice for Another

Because the tribalistic instinct is so deeply wired, it never disappears. It simply shifts targets. When one form of tribalism weakens, another tends to take its place.

Hoffer wrote that religious, political, and social movements are in many ways interchangeable. Since allegiance is driven more by psychology than ideology, fanatics frequently pass through multiple, and even contradictory, mass movements over their lifetimes.

People who condemn ignorant prejudice and false stereotyping in one domain almost invariably practice it in another. Many of these people either have a blind spot to their own prejudices or justify them as politically, ideologically, or socially acceptable. For example, a political progressive in Seattle who rightly criticizes rural Southern politicians and conservative commentators who promote unfair stereotypes and false prejudices about urbanites or minorities may simultaneously have and promote false and defamatory stereotypes about rural Southerners, Christians, and Republicans.

How the Online World Warps Perception and Exacerbates Tribalism

In just two decades, online platforms such as X, BlueSky, Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, and Reddit have become central to public and social life. They appear to be windows into society, but in truth are separate worlds, governed by algorithms and dominated by a small minority of highly active users. What happens online can inform and connect, but also mislead, polarize, and warp perception of reality.

Behind every feed is an algorithm shaping what is seen. Over 90% of online content is filtered this way. YouTube's recommendations drive 70% of its watch time, while TikTok keeps users hooked for an average of 95 minutes a day through finely tuned predictions. These systems mold perception, showing more of what people already engage with. The result is a filtered bubble where beliefs and tastes are constantly reinforced.

Self-selection deepens this effect, as people tend to follow like-minded accounts, social groups, and news media sources. On Facebook, for instance, users often curate homogeneous networks where dissent is rare, while on Reddit they join communities that match their views. During U.S. Presidential elections, researchers found that Facebook groups became powerful echo chambers, spreading biased and false information with little pushback.

The danger is not only information and viewpoint bubbles but the belief that one's own view is the only reasonable one. Echo chambers narrow understanding and make people more dogmatic. Adding to the distortion, most highly partisan social media posts come from a tiny minority. Jakob Nielsen, an internet usability expert, wrote: "In most online communities, 90% of users are lurkers who never contribute, 9% of users contribute a little, and 1% of users account for almost all the action." What dominates a feed often is not representative of the group, let alone the public.

This reinforcement creates environments where extreme and emotionally charged content gets amplified, while moderation and nuance are drowned out. John Jost, a professor of social psychology and Co-Director of the Center for Social and Political Behavior at New York University, calls this "ideological amplification," where interacting in like-minded groups pushes people to more extreme views. Cass Sunstein, a Harvard Law School professor and expert on group behavior, warns that echo chambers intensify group loyalty and online mob behavior. Outrage campaigns and viral shaming thrive in these conditions, creating the illusion that extreme views are the norm.

Working to Move Beyond Tribalism

Working to escape tribalism does not mean rejecting groups. Belonging is a basic human need, and groups can be productive, enriching, and healthy. The challenge is to participate in groups without becoming blinded by them. This begins with recognizing how easily all people are drawn into echo chambers and narrow tribalistic mindsets, and how these warp one's view of the world.

A key is to question your group's narratives and notice when they are self-righteous, promote groupthink, treat issues as black-and-white, and stereotype and demonize

outsiders. Another key is to humanize the so-called “other,” remembering that people in opposing groups have hopes, fears, and values similar to one’s own. Life rarely fits neatly into “good guys versus bad guys.” It is also important to seek out unfamiliar voices, engaging across divides, reading and listening beyond one’s comfort zone, and knowing that no side holds a monopoly on truth.

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