
CHAPTER 21

THE DISCONTENTS OF SUPER-TRIBE LIFE

"Each progressive spirit is opposed by a thousand mediocre minds appointed to guard the past." Maurice Masterlinck

Review of Previous Chapter Concepts

I like introducing a new concept by presenting it in different ways. This brief section is mostly a repeat of salient points in the previous chapter.

Humans are adapted to a small-tribe lifestyle. The invention of farming, some 9,000 years ago, permitted tribal size to increase beyond levels where it was possible to know everyone.

For millions of years a strange face meant "rival tribesman," and this automatically produced an uncomfortable feeling meant to prepare for possible conflict. In the new setting, however, this reaction had to be controlled. Some people reacted more strongly than others to the presence of strangers within the super-tribe. These ambivalent feelings could not be expressed openly because it was important for the super-tribe to work harmoniously in order to be strong and ready for the next war with a neighboring super-tribe.

Some people continued to resent the strangers but had to pretend to accept them. They felt the need to form associations with people they knew, and their associations resembled the primitive small tribe. Within the "small tribe" everyone knew each other, there was mutual trust and they could behave as naturally as their ancestors had in small tribes. This included offering help and forming mutually loyal bonds, which were problematic with the rest of the super-tribe.

Small tribesmen resented governance by the super-tribe, but they could not challenge it openly because intertribal warfare was an ever-present concern and super-tribe strength trumped resentments by those more comfortable in a small tribe setting.

The Origins of Liberalism and Conservatism

The small group associations met a need that could not be satisfied by the super-tribe because the small groups had rituals and symbolic oaths of loyalty that bonded the group in which everyone knew everyone else. These small groups were tolerated by those governing the super-tribe because they appeared to not threaten the legitimacy of the super-tribe, and they didn't question the priority of super-tribe loyalty. The small tribes eliciting the most fervent devotion resembled what we would now call a religious faction.

21. SUPER-TRIBE DISCONTENTS

The priority of super-tribe loyalty would always wane during long peaceful intervals. Too many years of peace emboldened small tribal associations to question super-tribal authority. The small tribes within the super-tribe might have accused the super-tribe leaders of disloyalty, and they may have attempted to overthrow them.

A clever stratagem was devised to topple the super-tribe: a small-tribe leader would appeal to the super-tribe membership with the argument that the super-tribe had lost its way and had to return to old-fashioned, small-tribe values. This argument was called “conservative” and it contrasted with the “liberal” ideas of embracing all members of the tribe in an attempt to assure super-tribe unity. The aspiring leader’s claim to legitimacy resonated at a deep level, for everyone had a subconscious memory of the old, small-tribe lifestyle. These subconscious memories had sustained a literature of “paradise lost” legends. Occasionally one of these small-tribe leaders would gain power, and promote values that slowly undermined the super-tribe’s vitality. Before the weakening of society could be felt there was a subdued euphoria that the super-tribe was awakening to a “new morning” (in case you hadn’t figured this out, I’m using US President Ronald Reagan as a model for this scenario.)

If this happens to a super-tribe that has achieved dominance over other super-tribes there is a reserve of strength that allows the dominant super-tribe to behave in reckless ways that don’t reveal the flaw in their continued belief in themselves. This is because human feelings are a poor guide to life outside the “ancestral environment.” The genes had millions of years to hone a human nature that is adapted to small tribe life, compared with only a few millennia of super-tribe living. The deepest emotions can be counted on to favor small tribe values over the new ones required for a super-tribe reality.

When cracks in the façade of a super-tribe’s dominance appear, blame is misplaced. Instead of identifying that the fault lies with small-tribe values guiding the super-tribe, most tribal members are willing to blame the residual of super-tribe values as the cause for their problems. As this misdirection of discontent continues, so does the super-tribe’s decline toward an eventual fall.

At least a couple other students of civilizations discontents have also noticed that the civilized state predisposes people to form smaller associations of like-minded people. The early 20th Century Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset wrote “Civilization is, above all, the will to live in common ... Barbarism is the tendency to disassociation. Accordingly, all barbarous epics have been times of human scattering, of the pullulation [*to send forth sprouts, buds, etc.; germinate; sprout*] of tiny groups, separate from and hostile to one another.”

In his 1970 book, *The Great Roob Revolution*, Roger Price wrote “The Roob therefore searches for a group that he can think of as ‘his’ group, a group with limits and definitions that he can understand and of which he can approve.” Price goes on to speculate that “caste systems” are an outgrowth of the same need for affiliation with a subset of society that resembles oneself.

21. SUPER-TRIBE DISCONTENTS

I once had a chart on the wall depicting when civilizations existed, and there must have been hundreds of them. Every one of them, in due time, came to an end. The chart demanded an answer. We should all demand an answer, but the only path to an honest answer requires unflinching courage in facing the Awful Truth. And what is that Awful Truth? It's that at a deep level all of us, in varying measure, are primitive tribesmen! Who has the courage for admitting that?

(Actually, there's a Truth more awful than this, but since most readers aren't ready for it I'll keep it to myself! Hint: f = ma.)

Liberalism, Conservatism and Individualism

The reader may have surmised that I think "liberalism" is better than "conservatism," since the latter is a throwback to something primitive. Maybe phrasing the question "which is better: liberalism or conservatism?" creates a false choice. For me, there's another way to live; I call it Individualism!

My problem with both liberalism and conservatism is that they place the individual in a subservient role to the group. Whereas conservatives want to serve a small-tribe, and liberals want to serve a super-tribe, both are ways for the group's gene pool to survive and flourish at the expense of individual welfare.

However, it is theoretically possible to imagine a group that is organized in a way that serves its individual membership without their subservience. This is a novel idea, and it follows in the long tradition of believers in utopias. But since all past utopias have had endings we must ask if it is even theoretically possible for mere humans to create and sustain one of them.

One very crucial pre-condition for the existence of a utopia is that it not come into contact with other societies! Why? Because tribes have evolved as the best way to engage in competition with all other groupings. For a tribe to dominate others its membership must be subservient to that tribe's competitive goals; a super-tribe will almost always prevail over a small-tribe, and super-tribes can only dominate (as "empires") if their membership is organized in ways that contribute to the super-tribe's competition with other super-tribes. A mere utopian community is not, by definition, organized for group competition, and since no group with resources will be left alone by others, whether it be a small-tribe or super-tribe, the only way for a utopian group to survive is to locate itself away from the notice of all tribes.

The philosopher and novelist Olaf Stapledon understood this when he wrote *Odd John* (1935), a science-fiction account of a genius who founded a utopia on a South Pacific island. It was later noticed by the British Navy and subsequently destroyed. Like Stapledon, I regretfully accept that no society can be established beyond the notice of the rest of his fellow humans, and hence no such society will ever endure even if it could be created. As for creating a utopian society that resides invisible amongst the rest of men, within a super-tribe for example, I am hopeful but not optimistic.

21. SUPER-TRIBE DISCONTENTS

The only utopia that seems feasible to me is what I refer to as Individualism, which surrenders to the reality of the super-tribe as an inevitable way for modern humans to be organized, yet, which relies upon the tolerance of a liberal super-tribe for the pursuit of an individual utopian lifestyle. A fellowship of like-minded individuals is possible within a liberal super-tribe, but would be difficult within a conservative super-tribe. Sweden and Iran could be cited as present-day examples of liberal and conservative super-tribes. I am thankful for America being a liberal super-tribe for most of its history, but its present course is straying from that liberal tradition.

If an enlightened individual is to pursue the “like-minded fellowship” path to a personal utopia, which may be the only version of a utopia that is feasible, consider the “One Percenters Challenge” - treated in the next chapter.