Is Ideological Tribalism in Our Genes? If So, What Can We Do About It?

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Political division among Americans is at the highest level since the end of the Civil War\(^1\), but politics are only one of many strata dividing our society. Other divisions - often nested within our political affiliations - are associated with factors such as wealth distribution, race and ethnicity, educational attainment, religious beliefs, and location of residence among others.

We are increasingly clustering with others who share our beliefs. As a consequence, we are becoming a nation of “ideological tribes” defined by these belief systems. When we are able to compromise, collaborate, and freely exchange ideas; idea diversity is a very good thing. But when ideas become rigid belief systems that are so entrenched that middle ground is lost, society is gravely challenged.

The divisions that define our new ideological tribalism are generally rooted in preexisting beliefs and grievances that have existed slightly below the surface for some time. When people are placed under stress, these subsurface rifts become fully exposed. These hidden differences are much like a fault line that is largely unknown and ignored until seismic pressures reach a critical level causing an earthquake.

The exposed rifts that separate us today were exposed by two concurrent pressures:

First, industrialized societies have been undergoing very rapid transformation caused by technological innovation and globalism. In this environment, constant change is essential in order to remain relevant. Or to quote W. Edwards Deming: “It is not necessary to change. Survival is not mandatory.” In a global economy, production facilities and jobs flow to regions with the greatest competitive advantages. These are determined by several factors including labor availability and efficiency, distance to markets, availability and cost of raw materials, government policies, regulations, and energy costs. Those locations that produce quality goods and services most efficiently become winners while those that cannot compete lose. When production facilities move to other regions, jobs and income are lost. Additionally, maximizing efficiency means leveraging technology. Implementation of technologies such as robotics and expert systems also results in elimination of jobs. These innovations also create a need for technical competencies that incumbent workers may lack. These changes unleash pressures that cause people and communities to experience a since of loss, abandonment and disenfranchisement.

The second contributing factor exposing our societal rifts is the flood of information available through “new” media such as social media, email, and websites coupled with the ‘reinvention’ of broadcast and cable TV and talk radio. The credibility of these sources falls on a continuum. Some are well vetted, analytical, and highly factual. But other sources may present a much more biased version of reality supporting the belief systems of our respective ideological tribes. Many of these information sources are economically driven. And for some outlets, inciting ideological tribes has become a better business model than distributing factual information.

The more that media inflame their respective bases, the more loyal their audiences become, and the greater the profit margin. As a consequence, we are now much more likely to consume information that supports our belief system and ignore those sources that do not. Simply stated, we are more likely to feed at the same information trough as other members of our ideological tribe. And as an end result, we are less likely to consider the viewpoints of the other side.

**Is Tribalism in Our Genes?**

As I mentioned earlier, many of our divisions are not new, they were merely suppressed. In a since, we seem to be hardwired for tribal segregation, and there is scientific data that support this notion.

Modern humans emerged in Africa about 200,000 years ago. But the first complex civilizations appeared only about 7,500 years ago. Therefore, Homo sapiens existed as primitive hunter-gatherers for over 96% of their time on the earth. As hunter-gatherers, the formation of tribes was an important adaptation that improved survival of the members. Once formed, tribes were better able to repel challenges whether from predators or from other groups. Therefore, the propensity to join a tribe was a trait that was likely favored by natural selection. It is also probable that early humans evolved to be highly suspicious of those who were different because outsiders were often seen as competitors for the limited resources needed for survival. The bottom line is that early humans who were more predisposed to tribalism were also more likely to survive and pass their genes to the next generation.

Remnants of evolution that occurred among our hunter-gatherer ancestors remains a part of our current genetic makeup, and we see several genetic fingerprints of our tribal past manifested in our current behavior. For example, studies conducted by the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education suggest that human babies exhibit a preference for others that are more like themselves. They also tend to be suspicious of adults who appear to be of a different race. This is quite possibly a modern day expression of genetic tendencies toward tribalism imprinted in our genomes as a result of natural selection pressures exerted on our hunter-gatherer ancestors. This supports the premise that we possess a genetic predisposition toward being with and trusting others who appear more like us. In other words, we may be genetically programmed to create tribes.\(^2\),\(^3\)

This should not be used as a defense of racism or discrimination toward others. There are numerous predispositions embedded in our DNA by evolution such as our tendencies to lie, steal, kill others, have unfettered sex, and otherwise behave badly. All of these are generally unacceptable in modern societies. Simple because a genetic predisposition exists doesn’t give us license to express the behavior. Being civilized means that we must learn to suppress our inherent tendencies, and we readily do this every day. We also construct laws and norms of civilized behavior to remind us that we must rise above our animal instincts and depress our destructive genetic tendencies. But as is the case with our tribal tendencies, we must recognize that they still exist and may resurface under the specific environmental circumstances.

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From the very beginning, tribalism was reinforced by a willingness of individuals to accept the religious belief of the tribe. Early religions emerged within tribes, and these beliefs likely supported common themes for each tribe. These beliefs and mythologies likely helped create rules that governed tribal behavior. It would therefore be logical that the ability to accept religion would draw individuals to tribes and enhance their survival. There is now scientific evidence that this supports this premise. Under experimental conditions, change in brain function has been detected among individuals engaging in intense religious experiences such as meditation and prayer. Scientists observed increased activity in the frontal lobe and decreased activity in the temporal and parietal lobes of the brain. Also, individuals with parietal lobe epilepsy tended to respond more dramatically to religious words and phrases than those with normal parietal lobes. Furthermore, when parietal lobe function was artificially suppressed, subjects reported sensations of the presence of something nearby often sensed as a divine or demonic presence. This suggests that our brains may have developed to accept religious input. This may also be an adaptation that strengthens a sense of belonging to the group. Simply stated, religious bonding fortifies ties among a group.4

**Ideological Tribal Leadership**

Ideological tribes are often inspired or led by charismatic individuals who manipulate the tribe by creating a narrative that is directly focused on members’ concerns. This messaging often leverages hyperbole and falsehoods to insight the audience and fuel additional discontent. For an aspiring ideological tribal leader, lying is often seen as being more efficient than truth-telling – at least over the short run. It is difficult and time-consuming to ascertain truth while it is easier and more time-efficient to simply fabricate false truths. Additionally, truth can be a bit boring while lies can be made exciting by creating false intrigue. The aspiring leader often couples the use of falsehoods with another strategy – attacking those that challenge his/her lies. This frequently escalates to the point that the opposition becomes vilified and in some cases foments violence against the opposition. This is the playbook of the demagogue: tell lies to inflate your value or the value of your proposition to the tribe then attack and vilify those who shine daylight on the lies.

We may also be genetically predisposed to follow demagogic leaders who leverage falsehoods and hyperbole. Washington University anthropologist and psychologist Pascal Boyer advances the notion that “having social support, from an evolutionary standpoint, is far more important than knowing the truth about some facts that do not directly impinge on your life.”5 In essence, believing falsehoods that lead to the strengthening of the tribe may have conferred an advantage upon our prehistoric ancestors, and this may still drive us toward accepting false news and misinformation today.

Psychologist Robert Feldman’s research furthers the premise that we are hardwired to except falsehoods. He observed that student peers seem to have favorable opinions of those who are effective liars. In other words, those with the highest high social skills (i.e. most popular) were the also the most likely to be deceptive.6

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Even more stunning is our willingness to spread false information when it supports our own biases and beliefs. A recent MIT study published in Science demonstrates our willingness to accept and spread falsehoods instead of facts. Studying over 126,000 Twitter posts tweeted by 3 million individuals, they found that fake news and false rumors reached more people and spread six times faster than more accurate stories. The authors suggest that the spread of biased and false information on social media was less related to volume and likely more due to something associated with “human nature.”7

The Persistence of Belief in Falsehoods
Once the tribe begins to accept hyperbole and falsehoods, it can be difficult to change minds even when tribal members become aware of the facts. This is often referred to as cognitive dissonance – the distress of simultaneously holding two or more opposing views. Even when an individual is presented with incontrovertible evidence of the fallacy of their belief, they will strongly resist changing their mind. In “When Prophecy Fails,” Leon Festinger, Henry Riecken and Stanley Schacter wrote that “a man with a conviction is a hard man to change. Tell him you disagree and he turns away. Show him facts or figures and he questions your sources. Appeal to logic and he fails to see your point.” Perhaps most alarming is the observation of these authors about our ability to accept that we are wrong about a false pretense. They further state, “suppose that he is presented with evidence, unequivocal and undeniable evidence, that his belief is wrong: what will happen? The individual will frequently emerge, not only unshaken, but even more convinced of the truth of his beliefs than ever before.”8

Containing Ideological Tribalism
Human history is largely about the struggle between the power of the tribe and our ability to suppress our tribal tendencies and live together as a diverse society. Sometimes we succeed and create prosperous societies, but even within these societies, ideological tribalism often re-emerges creating open fissures. There exists a conundrum: How do we honor diversity of thought while simultaneously avoiding the harmful effects of ideological tribalism?

Historically, tribal tendencies were held in check by brute force. This is a common theme of many totalitarian regimes. But this drastic approach is at best a temporary solution. Consider some contemporary strongmen: Saddam Hussein (Iraq), Marshall Tito (Yugoslavia), Hosni Mubarak (Egypt), Recep Tayyip Erdogan (Turkey), Vladimir Putin (Russia), and the Assad family (Syria). All suppressed tribalism by force, but when they died (Tito), were removed (Saddam, Mubarak), or weakened (in the case of Bashar al Assad) old rivalries were reignedite and civil war ensued. In some cases ideological tribalism can sit idle for generations, centuries, or even millennia.

The second approach to containing tribalism is much more complex, challenging, but also more rewarding. This is the creation and maintenance of an inclusive society wherein everyone has an opportunity to rise based upon their abilities. This can only be truly accomplished when everyone has equal access to the tools for success such as education, employment, and advancement. Call it a benevolent meritocracy.

In our attempt to create something approaching a benevolent meritocracy, we often run headlong into one of the shortcomings of democratic societies. Democracies are much better at responding to a

challenge after the fact than anticipating an upcoming challenge and taking preemptive measures. Consider World War II. We waited until we were attacked at Pearl Harbor before we could amass the political resolve to enter the war. We saw it coming, but resisted action until we fully felt the ramifications. This plays out over and over again. We must experience pain before taking action. The pain generates the political will. Therefore it becomes a game of crises management – allowing something to reach a critical mass before addressing it. So even when we have strong evidence that change is coming and that the change will have consequences, we wait until we experience the negative effects before taking action to mitigate the ramifications. We treat the disease instead of preventing the disease. This delay creates an opportunity for the change to negatively impact individuals, create fear, and blowback. These negative impacts include those factors that can incite ideological tribalism.

So even when liberal democracies are based on the most basic tenants of a tolerance and compassion, ideological tribalism can emerge under times of rapid and dramatic change. So what is the solution?

**Importance of Critical Thinking**

If we are to function as a benevolent meritocracy it is necessary that the citizenry has certain skill sets that allow them to delineate fact from fiction to the greatest extent possible. It is critical thinking skills that empower us to make decisions based on fact instead of on emotion. This reduces the abilities of others to fool us and increases the probability of making the right decision. This takes power away from the demagogues and returns it to the masses.

Often the facts are available if we only know where to look. I am old enough to remember when car-buying involved going to a dealer and hearing a salesman hype their product and often demean the competition. It was almost impossible to make effective comparisons of competing products or to truly know if you got the best price when you bought a car. Today, we have very sophisticated analytical tools available on the internet. Many of these are provided by respected third-party providers that are not compensated by auto manufacturers. We can use these tools to build a virtual car, assess its capabilities, examine technical reviews, and even get accurate pricing without ever talking to a sales person. This has fueled a critical thought process regarding car-buying and shifted the power away from the dealer to the consumer. The question becomes: How do we expand this process to include all aspects of our lives?

Critical thought is not sexy - it involves analysis, and frankly, hard work. Finding facts about complex issues requires us to set aside our passions and relentlessly pursue the truth. Critical thinking skills are not inherited; they must be learned. And as with many aptitudes, acquisition of a skill is only the first step. We must also practice critical thinking to achieve mastery.

Accomplished critical thinkers are able to effectively analyze information (and the sources of information) and then use this assessment to drive their decision-making. True critical thought also requires constant self-assessment leading to perpetual re-evaluation of our own belief systems to ensure that they too are unbiased and based upon fact to the greatest extent possible.

It takes little effort to accept something on face value. But if we are going to counter the falsehoods that often drive us apart, we need to possess the necessary skills and willingness to evaluate both pro and con arguments. In short, critical thinking is not easy, but it is absolutely necessary. The challenge will be in how to help society develop and practice these skills.
Critical thought is only one part of an effective strategy for challenging tribalism. It is not enough to simply “out” falsehoods and hyperbole. We must also execute an integrated approach that involves changing our own behavior and actively engaging others. This is illustrated by historian Jon Meacham who provides a holistic a call to action in five elements in *The Soul of America: The Battle for Our Better Angels*. Each of these speaks to limiting the negative impact of ideological tribalism by applying critical thinking skills and active engagement.

- The first element is for Americans to “enter the arena” and be willing to engage in the political process by making their voices heard.
- The second element is to “resist tribalism” and to be willing to engage those with differing viewpoints. He cautions us to move outside of our ideological tribes and listen to others.
- His third element is to “respect facts and deploy reason.” He emphasizes the need to make decisions based on facts and sound reasoning instead of opinions and hyperbole. This forces leaders and information sources to become more truthful. He quotes President Harry Truman: “The dictators of the world say that if you tell a lie often enough... people will believe it. Well, if you tell the truth often enough, they’ll believe it and go along with you.”
- The fourth point is to “find a critical balance.” He states that “being informed is more than knowing details and arguments. It also entails being humble enough to recognize that only on the rarest of occasions does any single camp have a monopoly on virtue or on wisdom.” He also quotes Thomas Jefferson: “Whenever people are well informed they can be trusted with their own government. Whenever things get so far wrong as to attract their notice, they may be relied on to set them to rights.”
- His final point is to “keep history in mind.” He states that “a grasp of the past can be orienting.” We should consider what has happened before because these experiences can help define turbulence ahead and provide a compass toward tomorrow.

One should never expect to find a simple solution to complex multi-dimensional problems. The divisions that we experience today will not evaporate tomorrow. But if we strive for civility, seek truth and think critically, and hold our leaders to the same standards; we will become less divided and find our compass to a better tomorrow.

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