Cultural history and theory

NEOTRIBALISM

TRIBALISM vs. GLOBALISATION Sonia Ward

*Purpose of tribe*

The visible common purpose of the tribe today has changed. When modern man first appeared on the earth about 45,000 years ago he was living in small tribal groups surviving by hunting and gathering. (Science News , 2013)Obliged to follow his food sources about he was unable to form permanent settlements. Tribal society was socialist, the individual was regarded as a tribal resource and everybody was required to work. All labour was linked to tribal survival and the proceeds of hunting and gathering were pooled and shared according to tribal custom.

*Is Tribal instinct rooted in the evolutionary process that created us?*

Man continues to seek the comfort of small kin like groups; globalizations progressive integration of economies and societies has created new social collectives that challenge our established models of politics and tradition. Are traditional criteria’s for defining tribes still valid in the context of rapid social change and transformation?

The context of tribal structures today

Tribal structures exist in times of plentiful yet unpredictable supply, increased migration, specialized targeted cable channels, websites, subReddits and social networks. Creating unprecedented opportunities for cross cultural pollination and intense territorial competition. Man exists in an increasingly crowded world where everyone without exception believes his own native customs and the religion he was brought up in, to be the best. The role and definition of tribe exists in an ever changing global dynamic. The topic continues to be debated by anthropologists, religious zealots, philosophers, social scientists, researchers and film makers.

Changing dynamics have cultivated a primitive longing for the bygone days of small kin like groups. The tribes, the many little groups we belong to, the interest based collectives have become fundamental to our experience of life.

In contemporary times the fear of tribal wars has led to role playing equivalents - team sports, primitive territorial instinct and conformity of dress. Tribal identity is linked to strong emotions. Tribal behaviour becomes acceptable when allied with a team. The sporting field is a way to authenticate a primitive longing for small kin like groups.

Tribes and belonging

Tribalism reinstates social meaning in an increasingly chaotic world. French sociologist Michel Maffesoli was perhaps the first to use the term neotribalism in a scholarly context. Maffesoli predicted that as the culture and institutions of modernism declined, societies would embrace nostalgia and look to the organizational principles of the distant past for guidance, and that therefore the post-modern era would be the era of neotribalism. (Maffesoli, 1996 )

Our predisposition to tribalism is investigated in the documentary Modern Tribalism, by Mimi George and Rick Kent. (alibris , 2001). Primitive urges are shown to exist still even in materialistic America (Kent & Rogers , 2012). Disenfranchised by organized religion, capitalism, and the general malaise of modern life, people turn to ancient rituals like extreme body piercing and tattooing to create a sense of belonging and identity.

Tribalism and biology

Anthropologists like Robin Dunbar and Edward O Wilson believe social behaviour is rooted in our biology. Their view is that we live in an increasingly crowded urban world with Stone Age social capacities. Tribalism is viewed as an inescapable fact of human neurology. Ethnic and tribal identity is linked to strong emotions and primal instincts -the word tribe continues to have primitive implications.

Territorial competition exists in a time of increasing population growth, creating tension between isolationisms on the one hand and cultural openness on the other. Raising the question can tribalism and globalisation exist peacefully? Doomsday theorists believe humanities magnificent but fragile achievements will become unstable due to increasing group sizes.

Professor Robin Dunbar anthropologist and evolutionary psychologist suggests 150 is the number of people we can have a meaningful relationship with, even with modern technology like Facebook (ABC Science , 2016). Under conditions where a person's limit for connection is reached, the human brain tends to resort to some combination of hierarchical schemes and stereotypes or other simplified models in order to understand so many people.

*Documenting tribal behaviour*

New age urban tribes and primitive behaviour involving exclusion and one dimensional identity are confronted by Sunny Abberton and Macario De Souza in the documentary, The Bra Boys (Souza, 2007). Set in the surfing community of Sydney the film explores issues related to territorialism, urban gangs and identity. Challenging media stereotypes of the Cronulla region by highlighting the Bra Boys’ role as mediators during the 2005 riots, the film makes a point about the ethnic diversity within the group itself. Suggesting that there is a common social background, as well as pride in their locality that informs their group identity, not a racist notion of nationalism as has sometimes been implied.

Marilynne Summers Robinson (born November 26, 1943) is an American novelist and essayist. Her book The Threat of Neotribalism discloses that each new wave of immigrants to America, from Scandinavians to Irish, Eastern Europeans to present day Latinos, has encountered harsh resistance. Only to end up weaving themselves inextricably into the fabric of society. Akin to cultural relativism this observation suggests that culture develops via the interaction of groups of people and the diffusion of ideas. (Financial Times , 2015)

*Tribalism and cultural relativism*

Franz Boas’ theory of cultural relativism opposes Dunbar’s view of tribal behaviour. He suggests, differences in human behaviour are not determined by innate biological dispositions, but are rather largely the result of cultural differences acquired through social learning. Culture is viewed as the primary concept for describing behavioural differences between human groups, and the central analytical concept of anthropology (Boas, 2003). Cultural relativists believe culture develops historically through the interactions of groups of people and the diffusion of ideas. The relativist’s view offers hope to exponents of a multicultural society and suggests migration enhances cultural experience, impacting positively on tribal instinct.

The epistemological claims that led to the development of cultural relativism have their origins in the German Enlightenment. Philosopher Immanuel Kant argued that human beings are not capable of direct, unmediated knowledge of the world. (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy , 2010 ) All of our experiences of the world are mediated through the human mind, which universally structures perceptions according to a priori concepts of time and space.

The terms a priori are used in philosophy to distinguish two types of knowledge, justification or argument. Priori knowledge or justification is independent of experience, a priori argument is one in which you can see that it is true just lying on your couch, you don't have to get up off your couch and go outside and examine the way things are in the physical world, you don't have to do any science. Priori knowledge of tribe today is too often founded on couch based media depictions of race and tribal behaviours.

*Is technological advancement creating a divide or closing the gap ?*

Theories on optimal design of cities, city traffic flows, neighbourhoods and demographics were in vogue after World War I. These conjectures were expanded in 1929 by Hungarian author Frigyes Karinthy, in a volume of short stories titled *Everything is Different*. (Karinthy) The volume *Chain Links* investigates in abstract, conceptual and fictional terms, many of the problems that would captivate future generations of mathematicians, sociologists, and physicists within the field of network theory. Karinthy predicted technological advances in communications, travel and friendship networks would grow larger and span greater distances. Karinthy believed that the modern world was 'shrinking' due to an ever-increasing connectedness of human beings.

Tribalism and social intelligence

The world is becoming increasingly interconnected. Social networks pervade popular culture. In particular the notion of six degrees has become part of the collective consciousness. Social networking websites such as Facebook, Friendster, Myspace, XING, Orkut, Cyworld, Bebo, and others have greatly increased the connectivity of the online space through the application of social networking concepts.

Are new networking opportunities enhancing our social skills? According to Edward O Wilson social intelligence is critical for success in a tribal environment. New questions surround what constitutes social interaction in a virtual world. Does technology advance tribalism and limit real life social interactions? Mass-society theorists fear transformation of people of various backgrounds into a generic mass will end up dehumanizing everyone. A world connected via technology where the derogatory term tribe is relegated to third world and the rest of the progressive world becomes nation.

Last updated 28th of October 2018

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