

Tribalism: The Cure and the Curse of Progress

Tribalism is at once the most powerful evolutionary advantage of the human lineage and the most reliable mechanism of its self-destruction. The boundary between the tribe that builds and the tribe that consumes is not in intensity or in scope, but in topology.

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Anthropology · Sociology · Tribalism · Ritual

I. THE PARADOX OF THE TRIBE

When the psychologist Henri Tajfel, at Bristol in the late 1960s and early 1970s, divided boys from the same school into two groups by a pseudo-random criterion — preference for Klee over Kandinsky — and then had them allocate rewards, the result was statistically intolerable. The boys systematically favoured their randomly assigned group, often at the cost of their own total gain. No history, no shared fate, no objective interface — only a label. And yet that was enough to call forth in their behaviour what anthropologists have for two hundred years described as the tribal reflex¹.

The same experiment can be read in two ways. Either as a diagnosis of human defect — we are creatures whose moral calculus is muddled by tribe. Or as testimony to what placed us atop the planetary biomass out of all proportion to our physical strength. The Bristol episode describes evolution's most successful move, not its failure.

Tribalism — the tendency to form and defend group wholes that carry preferential weight against their surroundings — is at once the most powerful evolutionary advantage of the human lineage and the most reliable mechanism of its self-destruction. Enlightenment will not overcome it; cultivating it carries consequences. It is a mechanic that produces civilization and genocide, science and the lynch mob, marriage and the cult, the firm and the sect, all from the same materials.

The question: what distinguishes the tribe that builds from the tribe that consumes? The answer lies in the topology of the tribe — its concrete architecture, not its size or intensity. This topology is recognizable, repeated across biological orders and historically documented.

II. THE BIOLOGICAL LOGIC OF AGGREGATION

To understand the human tribal tendency, one has to accept that it is not human. It is only the latest iteration of a strategy that has accompanied life for some two billion years.

One of the deepest transitions in evolution — greater than the emergence of the nervous system, greater than the emergence of consciousness — occurred when single-celled organisms began to form cooperative aggregates². From free-floating cells came biofilms, from biofilms colonial organisms, from colonial organisms the multicellular. From the multicellular eventually came the eusocial colonies of insects (ants, bees, termites), which today constitute roughly half of the global insect biomass — even though eusociality arose in a single, smaller branch. Cooperation pays.

The mechanic is, at its core, simple. The group can do what the individual cannot — defend a boundary, share information, divide labour, accumulate resources, outlast its own mortality. But group selection pressure simultaneously evokes the opposite tendency: any individual who could draw the benefits of the group without contributing to them would, at the level of the individual, win genealogically. Cooperation is therefore permanently threatened by defection from within.

Evolution found a structural answer: mechanisms for the detection and sanctioning of defection. In cell biology this is apoptosis — the programmed death of cells that fail to respond to regulatory signals from their surroundings. The failure of this mechanism is called cancer³. In eusocial insects it is chemical identification and the immediate killing of an intruder. In primate troops it is the sanction against cheating documented by Frans de Waal⁴: even the capuchin refuses a reward when it sees its neighbour receive a better one. Justice here is not a moral demand; it is a structural guarantee, without which cooperation would disintegrate.

From this follows a principle crucial to what comes next: every cooperative whole necessarily produces a boundary mechanism — a way to tell its own from the foreign. This mechanism is the constitutive condition of the whole's existence, not a flaw or a moral failure. A group without a boundary is dissolution; dissolution is mere statistical contact, not cooperation.

And at the same time — and this is the other side of the same coin — every boundary mechanism creates a category of the foreign that can become destructive the moment it loses calibration with reality. An immune system that cannot tell its own tissue from a pathogen produces autoimmune disease. The same principle holds at every level of life's organization: a boundary that does not recalibrate destroys what it was meant to defend.

III. THE HUMAN LEAP

What distinguishes the human tribal mechanism from the tribal mechanism of the grey heron? Structurally, almost nothing. It differs in capacity.

Joseph Henrich, in his work on cumulative culture⁵, shows that human intelligence is primarily collective intelligence. Individual *Homo sapiens* are not markedly more intelligent than chimpanzees on isolated tasks; what sets us apart is the capacity to accumulate knowledge across generations, so that the fifth generation stands on the four before it and need not invent the axe again. This accumulation requires a stable tribal structure — without a continuity of transmission, accumulation collapses. Tomasello⁶ adds that the most significant cognitive specialization of the human mind is not abstract thought but shared intentionality: the capacity of two individuals to hold a common goal in mind, which is the precondition of any coordinated activity reaching beyond the moment.

Robin Dunbar⁷ then documented that there is a cognitive ceiling on natural social networking — about 150 stable relationships to which the average human brain can assign a name, a context and an update. This number recurs across cultures: in the size of hunter tribes, villages, military companies, academic institutions, functional firms before the introduction of formal management. Above 150 members, tribal mechanics can no longer rest on personal acquaintance. It needs proxies — symbol, ideology, institution, ritual, name.

And here the human leap occurs. The symbolic layer that replaces personal acquaintance on scales beyond the Dunbar boundary makes possible the cooperation of millions — a capacity no other species has. Nation, church, corporation, scientific discipline, class, generation — all of these are symbolic tribes that hold together by shared meanings, not by personal relations. Yuval Harari calls them fictions⁸; the more precise mainstream-anthropological term is shared imagination — in the technical sense of really shared but physically non-existent coordination systems, without which cooperation above the Dunbar threshold would disintegrate.

The symbolic tribe is therefore the basic human technology. Everything we count as civilization rests on it. And — this is the first layer of the paradox — everything we count as the worst historical failures of civilization rests on it as well. The same mechanism, the same psychology, the same ease of activation. The difference is in the architecture.

IV. THE AUTOMATIC SHADOW

Viewed from the perspective of the biological logic of aggregation, Tajfel's experiment ceases to look like an anomaly and begins to make sense as economy. If the brain is to categorize a social environment in real time and decide on trust, resource sharing and risk, it needs a fast heuristic. A detailed cognitive analysis of every unknown individual would be computationally untenable. The brain therefore uses the cheapest available signal — the category — and decides by it.

Tajfel and his colleagues showed that this mechanism activates even in the complete absence of meaningful content. A bare label is enough — blues against reds, A against B, fans of this and that — and categorization automatically switches into preference and differential resource allocation. Muzafer Sherif, in the Robbers Cave Experiment (1954)⁹, showed the same in field conditions: boys at a summer camp in Oklahoma, divided into Eagles and Rattlers and exposed to mild competition, developed in two weeks a full tribal antagonism, complete with their own rituals, flags, derogatory nicknames and physical clashes. None of the boys had known any of the others before the camp. The group identities arose from nothing and behaved as if old.

Jonathan Haidt¹⁰ calls this layer of the human psyche the *hive switch* — the capacity to switch from individual mode into a tribal one in which the ego dissolves temporarily into the group, and the individual gains what Haidt calls collective ecstasy. This capacity is neuropsychologically real, evolutionarily explicable (groups that had it outcompeted those that did not), and culturally exploited across all traditions: military drill, religious ritual, sporting fanaticism, dance trance, political rally, corporate kickoff. The hive switch is not on the menu of choice. It is an innate capacity that either is used within a constructive frame or activates on its own — often destructively.

From this follows an unpleasant empirical fact. The shadow is the constitutive other side of the same mechanism that produces any cohesion at all — not a flaw of human nature that better upbringing or higher education can remove. Arguments of the form „if we were all rational, tribal commitments would

vanish" confuse the tribal tendency with a lack of intelligence. The data show that the educated, the rational and the progressive carry tribal dynamics just as fully — only their tribe has different symbols and believes of itself that it is not one.

That last sentence matters. The most dangerous form of tribalism is the tribalism that asserts about itself that it is universalism. Because it denies its own tribal structure, it has no reflection on it — and any mechanism without reflection slides into its worst expressions without recognizing them as itself.

V. THE MIMETIC MACHINE

To understand more deeply what holds the tribe together, one has to reach for a theory that remains marginalized within the scientific mainstream but whose empirical predictive power is surprisingly high: the mimetic theory of René Girard¹¹.

Girard's first claim is that human desire is not autonomous but mimetic. We desire what others desire. Not primarily for the inner value of the object, but through the imitation of others' desire. This structure of desire is unstable, because it leads to rivalry — if you and I both desire the same thing, we end up standing as adversaries, each defined by the other. Mimetic rivalry tends to escalate, because each side is forced to confirm its position with ever more intense desire, which the other side mirrors precisely.

Girard's second claim is the structural solution that human communities empirically found: the scapegoat mechanism. When mimetic rivalry inside a group reaches a critical point at which it threatens the group's disintegration, the group identifies an external or peripheral figure — a scapegoat — onto whom the entire internal antagonism is transferred. The destruction or expulsion of this figure releases the pressure, and the group restores its cohesion. Girard shows that this mechanism stands behind the emergence of religious rites (sacrifice), legal systems (executions), political processes (purges), and the everyday social mechanic (gossip, shared contempt, online pile-ons).

The mimetic machine is therefore a source of cohesion, but at the cost of producing a victim field. A group that has no internal mechanism of reflection is structurally compelled to produce victims periodically, otherwise it disintegrates. A structural statement about the dynamics of the group as a whole, not a moral statement about the individuals in it — most participants in the scapegoat mechanism never recognize it.

Empirical confirmation of Girard's frame comes from unexpected directions. The sociologist Mark Juergensmeyer¹², after decades of research on religious violence, showed that violent phases of religious movements systematically correlate with internal disintegration of the group — outward attack does not occur until there is an internal threat of fission. Political-science research into genocides (Ervin Staub and colleagues)¹³ reaches the same conclusion: genocidal acts come at moments of perceived threat to the group, not at its peak strength. Sacrificial logic is the default reaction of the tribal organism to internal stress.

And here the metaphor approaches its boundary. The same cohesion that holds the group together — shared symbol, shared desire, shared identity — tends, under stress, to produce a victim. The cure turns into poison at the very point where the mechanism that has been healing decides to heal with someone else's wound.

VI. THE BOUNDARY

What, then, distinguishes the tribe that builds from the tribe that consumes? The question matters in practice, because the tribal mechanic cannot be avoided — it can only be calibrated. Calibration is a structural task, not a moral one: the point is to be part of a better-built whole, not to be a better person. A better-built whole tolerates average people. A poorly built whole spoils even exceptional ones.

Six conditions, each empirically documented and operatively recognizable. Where they are met, the tribe functions as a cure. Where they are not, it slides into a curse. There is no smooth transition between them — they are either structurally present in the tribe, or they are not.

Boundary permeability. A tribe one can enter, and from which one can leave, without an existential cost is a tribe that must hold itself together by quality. A tribe with an impermeable boundary — defined by lineage, blood, sacred rite or ideological loyalty — has no quality feedback, because it has no comparison. Karl Popper¹⁴ formulated this distinction as the difference between the open and the closed society, and documented why open societies survive crises that closed ones succumb to: they survive because they correct themselves.

Multiplicity of identity. An individual who simultaneously belongs to several tribes (occupation, neighbourhood, hobby, family, faith) is much harder to draw into tribal escalation, because each of his identities has a price he would lose. An individual whose identity has been reduced to a single tribe is structurally available for any tribal action whatever, because there is nothing else to lose. Robert Putnam¹⁵ described this phenomenon as the difference between *bonding* and *bridging* social capital: bonding ties like to like, bridging ties different to different. A society with only bonding is structurally susceptible to violence, because it has no way to dilute its tribal reflex with anything else.

Reality as arbiter. A tribe whose internal truths are regularly tested against external reality (a scientific discipline, a craft, a sport, a business with risk, a court case) has a structural brake against its own illusory cohesion. A tribe whose internal truths are tested only by the loyalty of its members (a sect, an ideological party, an academic school cut off from empirics) has no such brake and slides into epistemic closure. In the first configuration, criticism is valuable feedback; in the second, criticism is treason. The difference lies in who has the last word — external reality, or internal consensus.

Bounded conflict. A functional tribe has rituals, institutions and procedures that channel internal tension so that it does not escalate into an existential game. A court, a debate, a vote, a committee, a formalized tournament. These forms work as the mechanisms that prevent mimetic escalation from turning into a sacrificial act — they look like soulless bureaucracy only after they vanish. Where such forms are

missing, or are dishonoured as relics, internal tension finds its outlet in scapegoating once it reaches a certain level — without exception that history has documented. Civilizational institutions function as insurance, not as decoration.

Internal criticism as value. A tribe that rewards internal criticism is a tribe capable of learning. A tribe that punishes criticism as disloyalty loses the capacity to correct itself, and slowly opens a gap between its model of the world and the world itself. That gap fills with symbol — and at the moment it grows too wide to close, the tribe either disintegrates or shifts into sacrificial mode, in which it explains the gap by the active malice of an enemy. This is not a historical rarity; it is the modal outcome of a tribe without internal criticism.

Externalized purpose. A tribe whose meaning lies outside itself — a craft, a problem, a project, a territory, a generational task — has a reference point against which it can measure itself. A tribe whose meaning is itself is structurally condemned to expansion or to sacrificial logic, because it has no way of measuring its success other than by its own size or by demonstrated superiority. Most cults, most ideological movements in their terminal phases, and most toxic corporate cultures share this property: their internal goal has replaced any external one, and from that moment everything they do is self-reference.

Six conditions. Each has a biological parallel. A cell that responds to signals from its surroundings (permeability), has multiple regulatory loops in its genome (multiplicity), respects the tissue's growth limits (reality as arbiter), retains a functioning apoptosis (bounded conflict), reacts to repair mechanisms (criticism), and serves the function of the tissue (externalized purpose) — that is a healthy cell. A cell that gradually loses these conditions is a cancer cell. The sequence in which tumours lose individual regulatory layers has been described¹⁶, and its structural parallel in social wholes is striking enough not to be dismissed as poetic.

The boundary between cure and curse is therefore qualitative (what architecture of tribe), not quantitative (more or less tribe). Thin, but sharply given.

VII. WHY NOW

If the structure of tribalism is a constant of human nature and the conditions of the generative tribe are describable, the question arises: why does the present environment systematically push toward the toxic configuration? The answer lies in the convergence of several factors that together create a historically novel situation.

Scale mismatch. Human tribal psychology evolved in environments of 50–150 individuals. The contemporary environment exposes it to social networks of billions of nodes. The brain has no capacity to discriminate billions individually; it reduces them to symbolic categories and activates tribal reflexes at full intensity. The result is what Henrich calls *evolutionary mismatch*: an ancient heuristic triggered on in-

puts it was not designed for. The whole human tribal apparatus was, first, never built to hold simultaneous representations of thousands of abstract „us“ and „them“ in the mind, and, second, cannot in real time tell whether it is reacting to reality or to a symbolic feed.

Algorithmic segregation. The digital environment of the present is optimized for engagement, and engagement is, on the data¹⁷, significantly predicted by emotional polarity (outrage, identification, tribal agreement). Algorithms therefore structurally produce environments in which each individual reads predominantly what confirms their tribe, and what does not is delivered to them as caricature. This degrades two conditions of the generative tribe at once: it lowers permeability (less contact with other tribes) and lowers reality as arbiter (information is filtered through identity, not through empirics). The algorithm is not malicious — it is merely indifferent to which tribal configuration it serves.

Erosion of cross-cutting institutions. Putnam documented the decline of traditional institutions that linked different tribes — sports clubs, choirs, professional associations, local communities, congregations, pubs. Not for the sake of their own virtue, but because they kept multiple identities alive in a single person and so reduced the risk of single-axis tribal reduction. Without them, the contemporary individual tends to reduce identity to one sharply drawn tribe — ideological, ethnic, generational, professional — because the other layers have weakened to the point of no longer providing alternative belonging. This reduction is what is left when the other layers have disappeared.

Commodification of identity. The contemporary environment also sells identity. The tribe is a marketing product: brand, subculture, political camp, lifestyle. This would not be destructive in itself, were it not that it requires the customer to remain — and so business models lean on activating the hive switch, which they keep up as a permanent consumer relationship. Identity becomes something that is permanently tended and defended rather than a layer the individual activates and deactivates by situation. Permanent defence of identity is, by definition, a regime in which any foreign signal is a threat. That is the structural precondition of the toxic tribe.

These four factors reinforce one another. Scale mismatch triggers tribal reflexes; algorithms amplify them; the erosion of cross-cutting institutions reduces the count of competing identities; the commodification of identity makes the defence of identity a permanent task. The result is an environment in which six conditions of the generative tribe structurally decline, and tribal mechanics shifts from cure to curse — because the structure around people now pushes elsewhere than it did before.

Empirical claim from inferential: the factors listed are individually documented in psychological, sociological and economic research (data on engagement, Putnam's longitudinal data, the literature on evolutionary mismatch). *Inferential claim*: their convergence produces the contemporary shift toward toxic tribalism (operatively supported by trend data, but causal attribution in complex social systems remains open to alternative explanations). *Speculative claim*: this shift is reversible if some of the factors listed are deliberately rewritten (operatively untested; historical precedents exist, but under different conditions).

VIII. CELL, OR TUMOR

When Lynn Margulis¹⁸ proved in the 1960s that the eukaryotic cell — the cell composed of nucleus, mitochondria and other organelles — arose by the engulfment and integration of several formerly independent organisms, biology gained a deeper line of thought about what *individual* actually means. The eukaryotic cell is in fact a tribe of several lineages that found a way to function as one. The mitochondrion has its own DNA, its own replication cycle, and in some sense its own interest — and yet it works for the whole. The human cell, then, is not the atom of life. It is a tribe stabilized by a peace treaty.

The multicellular organism is the next level. The human body is ten trillion cooperating cells plus a microbiome of tens of trillions of cells of other species, which together form a functional holobiont. When anything in this tribe stops respecting the boundary signals, it becomes a tumour — the cells continue to reproduce, but they have lost orientation toward the whole. Strikingly, a cancer cell is often remarkably capable; it has merely lost a layer of regulation that would have placed it inside a wider purpose. Capacity stripped of regulation is destruction; regulation stripped of capacity is rigidity; the two together, in balance, are life.

The parallel is not merely literary. There are researchers who argue that it is structurally exact¹⁹ — that the same principles of governing cooperation work at biological and social levels and form a hierarchy of patterns describable in a common language. No commitment to that strong claim is made here; merely: anyone who looks at the six conditions of Section VI and compares them with the six hallmarks of healthy tissue versus tumour will find parallels empirically hard to explain as coincidence.

What follows for someone seeking orientation in complexity? Abandoning the tribe cannot be done — the attempt produces an anti-tribe tribe, which tends to be the most toxic of all, because it does not recognize its own tribal structure. Passive acceptance leads to the absorption of one's own identity into the foreign one. What remains is to read the architecture of the tribes one enters and helps shape — permeability, multiplicity, reality as arbiter, bounded conflict, the value of criticism, externalized purpose.

Tribalism is cure and curse, but not at random. Its dual character rests on the architecture that holds even when character fails; character usually bends in a crisis. Every tribe we belong to is a peace treaty among several lineages, and the continued negotiation of that treaty is the condition of the tribe's existence. When the negotiation ceases — even out of the certainty that it is no longer needed — the tribe slides into a tumour.

A bodily tumour does not know itself. A human tribe can hold that reflection, and in that holding lies the structural leverage tribalism allows.

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