

Is Tribalism the Worst Idea in History?

My student, the color drained from his face, explained that a blood feud had just begun that would continue for generations.

I had been teaching an MBA class when this student – a Kurd from Turkey – received an emergency phone call from home. In his village, police had responded to one neighbor's complaint that the chickens of another neighbor were running loose in the street. The patriarch of the family whose chickens were loose was incensed when he came home to learn that the "honor" of his family had been insulted by the police visit. In rage, he shot to death the members of the family that had called the police.

I had been lecturing about the rule of law.

At about the same time that the chicken feud began, Chinese journalist Zhou Qing was exposing Chinese food scandals. Clenbuterol is a pig-feed additive that makes pork redder and meatier; because it's poisonous to humans, it has been banned. [Newsweek](#) related this story reported by Zhou:

Zhou hears from a food-safety official about a provincial political leader told by a farmer that his pigs still get the banned chemical because it makes their meat a hot seller in urban areas. "Don't you know that it harms people?" asks the official. "Yes," replies the farmer. "But city people have free medical care, so it's no problem."

Both events have the same root cause: tribalism.

My Clan Über Alles

Tribalism is the belief in the supremacy of one's group identity over the rights of individual human beings. Tribal

identity fosters negative feelings, even hatred, toward those outside the tribe. Prejudices are reinforced while commerce and contact with those outside of the tribe are minimized. Tribal societies tend to be closed societies.

Tribalism is a failed system that has brought poverty, misery, and destruction to the world. Political scientist R.J. Rummel, in his book [Death By Government](#), documents over 133 million murders of civilians by governments in the 20th century. [Many of those murders](#) were of groups of people – Armenians, Bangladeshis, Bosnians, Chinese, Jews, Poles, Rwandans, Ukrainians – murders driven by ethnic tribal hatred.

As journalist Matt Ridley explains in his book [The Origins of Virtue](#), the “tendency of human societies to fragment into competing groups has left us with minds all too ready to adopt prejudices and pursue genocidal feuds.”

Tribe and Thou

The Vienna-born philosopher Martin Buber fled to Jerusalem after Hitler came to power. In his best-known work, [I and Thou](#), Buber observed two fundamental ways of seeing the world: “I-Thou” or “I-It.” Through the “I-It” lens, others are seen as less than us, either as objects who help us or obstacles that get in our way. Tribalism, at its core, looks at the world through “I-It” eyes.

In contrast, through the lens of “I-Thou,” we see others as individuals, as people as important as we are. James Ferrell of the Arbinger Institute, a peacemaking organization, in his essay [“Resolving the Heart of Conflict,”](#) writes of Buber’s work and observes a consequence of the “I-It” beliefs:

When we choose to see others as objects and fail to see that they count as we ourselves do, we create within ourselves a new need. *We create the need to be justified for our objectification of others.* (emphasis added)

The Chinese farmer justifies poisoning city dwellers, and the Kurdish patriarch justifies his murderous rage. Tribalism suppresses humanity's capacity for empathic connections by justifying the belief that others outside one's own tribe are enemies.

Can we even imagine an America where each ethnic group and each religious group distrusts any other group and eschews contact with outsiders?

Ridley asks us to consider, "Which human institutions generate trust and which ones dissipate it?"

Harvard social psychologist Gordon Allport, back in the 1940s, developed his famed [contact hypothesis](#): "Increasing exposure to out-group members will improve attitudes toward that group and decrease prejudice and stereotyping."

The market process under the rule of law does just that. Capitalism rewards those who have empathy for others. Those who better understand how to fulfill the needs of others are more successful in a society where the rule of law is supreme.

Capitalism Promotes Trust

To be sure, Americans, too, slip into the "I-It" mode, but capitalism tends to extinguish hateful behavior.

Journalist James Surowiecki in his *Forbes* essay "[A Virtuous Cycle](#)" helps us to understand why. Using examples from history, he shows how it came to be that under capitalism, "buying and selling were no longer about a personal connection. It was now about the virtue of mutual exchange."

Surowiecki continues,

In place of relationships founded on blood or affection, capitalism creates relationships founded solely on what Marx called the money nexus. But from a certain angle this

impersonality should instead be seen as a virtue, because it advocates the fair treatment of people not on the basis of consanguinity or proximity, but just because they're, well, people. Capitalism, ultimately, widens horizons, because it makes the idea of trusting only people within your particular ethnic or geographic group seem outmoded. At its core, the system is cosmopolitan, since you should be willing to trade with anyone who can offer a good deal.

The Chinese pig farmer who poisons city dwellers is able to sleep at night because there is no social norm of trust that has been established by commerce in a free market. In his eyes, city dwellers are less worthy than rural dwellers.

Former attorney general [Michael Mukasey has said](#) that America is "the only nation in the world to define itself not by blood or land, but by a law, the Constitution." The rule of law, with its guarantee of equal rights for all, allows commercial transactions to bring together people from different countries in a market process; ancient superstitions and prejudices dissolve in that process.

Countries that have allegiance to the rule of law are open societies. Immigrants are free to maintain cultural and religious differences as long as all people are united in the "melting pot" by their belief in the principles of liberty and the rule of law.

Toward a Better Idea

We share a common humanity, but that doesn't mean that one idea is just as good as another. Some ideas lead to generations of blood feud. Others justify the poisoning of distant strangers.

A very different idea "advocates the fair treatment of people not on the basis of consanguinity or proximity, but just because they're, well, people," as Surowiecki puts it.

The market process, paired with the rule of law, facilitates empathy and respect for others and a peaceful and prosperous society.

Those who still live in tribal societies want the same things we do: happy and prosperous lives for themselves and their children. But they don't yet understand that, in an expanding marketplace, their goals are compatible with – even best achieved by – promoting the well-being of all those strangers outside the tribe. With freer access to the growing network of commercial exchange, however, that understanding is inevitable.

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