

in: *Forms of government, Sociology, Social psychology, Political science*

Tribalism

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Tribalism is a social system where human society is divided into small, roughly independent subgroups, called 'tribes'. This phenomenon is named for tribes because tribal societies lacked any organizational level beyond that of the local tribe, with each tribe consisting only of a very small, local population. The internal social structure of a tribe can vary greatly from case to case, but, due to the small size of tribes, it is always a relatively simple structure, with few (if any) significant social distinctions between individuals. Some tribes are particularly egalitarian, and most tribes have only a vague notion of private property; many have none at all. As a result, tribalism has also been sometimes called "primitive communism" (though this term clearly does not apply to *all* tribes). One thing that is certain is that tribalism was the very first social system that human beings ever lived in, and it lasted much longer than any other kind of society to date.

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Tribes and tribalism in anthropology

While ethnocentrism is one of only a very small handful of human cultural universals, the term "tribalism" has become nearly synonymous with it. This is largely due to the Eurocentrism of early anthropologists who forced tribal societies into a simplistic model of cultural evolution.

If nothing else, tribal conflict can never achieve the absolute scale of civilized warfare. Tribes use forms of subsistence such as horticulture and foraging which, though more efficient, cannot yield the same number of absolute calories as agriculture. This limits tribal populations significantly, especially when compared to agricultural populations. When tribal conflict does occur, it results in few fatalities. Lawrence Keeley argues in *War Before Civilization*, however, that as a *percentage* of their population, tribal violence is much more lethal. Nevertheless, Keeley also admits that the absolute numbers are so low that it is difficult to disentangle warfare from simple homicide, and Keeley's argument does not ever cite any forager examples, save the anomalous Inuit.

Tribalism and evolution

Tribalism has a very adaptive effect in human evolution. Humans are social animals, and ill-equipped to live on their own. Tribalism and ethnocentrism help to keep individuals committed to the group, even when personal relations may fray. This keeps individuals from wandering off. Thus, ethnocentric individuals would have a higher survival rate -- or at least, with their higher commitment to the group, more opportunities to breed.

In larger, agriculture societies, however, this can become maladaptive. Nations and empires force tribes and small groups into regular contact--a novel situation in human evolution. At the same time, agricultural societies produce larger populations, which can field larger armies, while providing the material resources with which to arm and maintain those armies. Thus, the natural tribalistic impulse becomes maladaptive in its new setting, leading to ethnic or racially motivated conflict, genocide and ethnic cleansing.

According to a study by Robin Dunbar at the University of Liverpool, primate brain size is determined by social group size. Dunbar's conclusion was that the human brain can only really understand a maximum of 150 individuals as fully developed, complex people (see Dunbar's number). Malcolm Gladwell expanded on this conclusion sociologically in his book, *The Tipping Point*. According to these studies, then, "tribalism" is in some sense an inescapable fact of human neurology, simply because the human brain is not adapted to working with large populations. Beyond 150, the human brain must resort to some combination of hierarchical schemes, stereotypes, and other simplified models in order to understand so many people.

Nevertheless, complex societies (and corporations) rely upon the tribal instincts of their members for their organization and survival. For example, a representative democracy relies on the ability of a "tribe" of representatives to organize and deal with the problems of an entire nation. The instincts that these representatives are using to deal with national problems have been highly developed in the long course of human evolution on a small tribal scale, and this is the source of both their usefulness and their disutility. Indeed, much of the political tension in modern societies is the conflict between the desire to organize a nation-state using the tribal values of egalitarianism and unity and the simple fact that large societies are unavoidably impersonal and sometimes not amenable to small-society rules.

In complex societies, this tribalistic impulse can also be channeled into more frivolous avenues, manifesting itself in sports rivalries and other such "fan" affiliations.

"New tribalism"

See also

- Dunbar's number
- Sectarianism
- Ethnocentrism
- Jingoism
- Chauvinism
- Neo-Tribalism
- Tribal chief

External links

- "The New Tribalism" by University of Oregon president Dave Frohnmayer, condemning a "new tribalism" in the traditional sense of "tribalism," not to be confused with "new tribalism."

- "Tribalism in Africa" by Stephen Isabirye

de:Tribalismus



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