

The Danger of Tribalism on a Large Scale

My wife is from Mexico City. She's an immigrant to the United States. She first lived in Chicago before moving to Salt Lake City, where we live now. In Chicago she lived in an area with a strong latino and Spanish-speaking majority. After moving to Salt Lake City, she was forced to learn English since that's what she was surrounded with. And she did, albeit with plenty of teasing from me.

She recently remarked on how she's noticed that there are a lot more latinos around Salt Lake City than there used to be. She wondered what I thought about that, if it bothered me to see so many more "brown" people. This sparked a conversation.

Does it bother me to see more latinos in Salt Lake City? No. I don't believe it does. That's the honest truth. As a teenager I worked with latino immigrants in the food industry (fast food) and the auto industry (lot tech). My high school girlfriend was a first generation Mexican, a chicana. I met my wife at 19, dated, married, and had 3 half-brown children with her (so far). "Brown" people have never bothered me before, why would they bother me now?

I consider immigrants to be among the hardest working people humanity has to offer. They seem to want it more and understand what it would mean to lose it, better. Every immigrant I've worked with and every immigrant I know today (not *only* latino) is an incredibly hard worker. They put me to shame.

Seeing more latinos in my area, or more Africans, Arabs, Indians, Asians, Eastern Europeans, *et cetera* doesn't bother me at all. I see them as my fellow human beings. However, I do think it would be incredibly easy for me to view them as the outgroup and be bothered by their presence. I think that's due to my evolution as a member of a tribalistic species.

Tribalism on the scale that we evolved under, meaning, small family/kin-based tribalism, was obviously a very beneficial thing for our survival. I recognize that. I even go so far as being okay with bigotry in words, but not in actions. Think whatever you please about someone based on some characteristic, but if you hurt them or take their stuff because of it, we'll have a problem.

But tribalism on a scale larger than this is incredibly dangerous, and for that must be opposed. Why? Here's how I put it to my wife, and admittedly this is all theoretical, but I think it has merit.

When "our tribe" is small, how we consider the outgroup is necessarily tempered by physical proximity and cultural similarity. When "our tribe" is large, the outgroup is more

physically distant and culturally foreign, and more easily considered to be subhuman.

Let me put this in mathematical terms. On a scale of 1 to 10 on how human we consider other people to be, members of “our tribe” are a 10.

The smaller our tribe, the closer to us are members of the outgroup, and the higher they are on the scale. As small tribes, the outgroup members defaulted around 8 or 9. Subhuman, but not by much. We still had *some* compassion and empathy for them, but if it's our kin or theirs, we choose ours. Every time. If we feel threatened by them, they drop down the scale. This makes it easier to deal with them with violence, if necessary.

The larger the tribe, the more distant from us are members of the outgroup, and the lower they are on the scale. As a large tribe, the customs and experiences of the outgroup are more foreign to us, and so they default around 6 or 7. A but more subhuman. We hear of their woes and tragedies, and not much empathy or compassion is felt for them. We very rarely “shed a tear” on their behalf.

I think it takes more effort to push the outgroup down the scale when “our tribe” is small as opposed to large. They start higher. The threat must be more apparent before we can bring ourselves to hate them enough to take up arms against them.

This is why militaries and nations have to propagandize the subhumanity of the enemy. You see this in war. People don't want to use violence against people that aren't a direct threat. You have to make them believe that the enemy is at the bottom end of this scale before a person will be able to bring himself to inflict violence upon them.

The larger the tribe, the more easy it is to view the outgroup as subhuman at levels that disable our compassion and empathy for them. Small tribes aren't immune to this, of course, but it's less likely to go this route unless and until the threat is more obvious. Nationalism is a form of large-scale tribalism. I despise nationalism. Having consideration for our tribe, our families, our kin, is virtuous, but when it grows beyond our immediate tribe, it becomes a ticking time bomb of mass murder.

I don't currently subscribe to any large-scale tribes, other than humanity itself, I guess. I do and am able to inflict violence on other forms of life. I find plants and meats of all sorts delicious. Other people disagree and modify their diets accordingly. That's all good and well. I don't view them as subhuman and I hope they don't view me as subhuman. I like to think that I'm consciously considerate on how I view my fellow man, and err on the side of compassion and empathy.

And I try very hard not to be a prick, without cause.