

TRIBAL HOSTILITY

For Australians tribal emotions usually run no deeper than Sydney-Melbourne rivalry or barracking for their football teams. Therefore, the vision of ethnic fanatics relishing the massacre of innocent people in the World Trade Centre is both alarming and incomprehensible. The subsequent fears of anthrax have only been rivalled by the fear of the infectiousness of the hatred. This hatred wants to drag civilization into a primitive tribal conflagration.

Let me hasten to say that I am not one of those who believe that the thin veneer of civilization hides jungle killers. Tribes can live in harmony, as well as hostility. The problem is that we carry remnants of tribal mentality, including its hostile face, in the circuitry of our subconscious baggage. It can be perversely tapped, fanned, and exploited by people ambitious for power. Examples were Hitler and Stalin. Current examples are Saddam Hussein, the Taliban, and bin Laden.

Tribal hostility draws on deep evolutionary roots. From ants to apes social animals demarcate 'us' and 'them' and territory, and rally behind leaders for defence or attack on enemies. Tribal mentality shows throwbacks to evolutionary times in demonization of out-groups ('them') as large predators, or dehumanizing them as animals to be ignored, hunted or exploited. Us-them demarcations included body appearance (which evolved into racism), ethnicity (incorporated in nationalism), and myths (included in later religion and ideology). Myths included common ancestry, divine origins, and historical struggles in order to accomplish god-given missions. Myths demanded obedience and sacrifice, in return for protection, prosperity and eternal happiness - if not in this life, then in the next.

Tribal mentality is relatively visceral, emotional, simplistic, lacking self-awareness or an outside historical perspective. It blurs past and present, hence grudges can be carried over centuries. It confuses part and whole; hence attack on members of another tribe is like wounding the whole predator. It blurs life and death, so death can be eternal life. It does not distinguish symbolic and real, so rituals, writings and slogans can take on concrete qualities.

Tribal mentality, including its hostile aspect, enhanced survival in harsh conditions. A rustle or a smell was truly symbolic of enemies, which did not change over centuries. Even revenge on innocent members of damaging tribes was useful, as it could deter further attack from the tribe. And myths gave comfort in an uncertain environment. These days remnants of tribal thinking predominate in children up to the age of seven, and can do so in certain hypnotic and traumatic states. The right hemisphere of the brain is the prevailing site for such thinking.

Tribal hostility in adults is irrational and dangerous to civilization, but it can be fanned through stimulating old survival fears. Terrorists are adept at doing this through killing which they then use to define 'us' and 'them' for their own purposes. The process is perverse because it exploits people's actual desires for peace, security, belonging and esteem. Through the witches' brew of fear (that all good things are threatened by 'them'), and salvation (through mythical promises), power hungry leaders gain access to the tribal mind. Through such access they extract devotion to themselves to the death. Death is all they offer in the end, and not only to their enemies. Their own people are enslaved and sacrificed. Bin Laden and the Taliban may use colonial, class, and religious rhetoric, but they are trying to fan a tribal war on a world scale with themselves at the helm of unbridled power.

The Hitlers, Stalins and bin Ladens flourish in times of marked social discontent. The social problems and the worse problems such leaders cause have different logics. The logic regarding terrorists is to extirpate them rather than let their virulence spread. But the discontents also need addressing, with the same energy as the terrorists are being currently pursued.

Back in Australia, to make a wise and civilized choice in the coming elections, we need to separate the logics of internal national discontent (or satisfaction), the reality of external threat, and the fanning of our tribal fears in order to rally behind the leader with our votes. When our armed forces are used against refugees fleeing the very same terrorists whom we are fighting, we may suspect that we are asked to vote more on the basis of our fears and desires for salvation than logic.

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