



Stop Accusing the Other - Start Engaging

a review by Dick Burkhart of

Political Tribes:

Group Instinct and the Fate of Nations

By Amy Chua (2018)

This outstanding book is a “warning shot across the bow” of escalating conflicts both in the US and abroad if we don’t get our act together. Amy Chua identifies a key part of that act as focusing on tribalism, which is already ripping us apart in the US, just as it led to the US defeat in Vietnam and the endless war in Afghanistan. What Chua has to say about Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Venezuela is a long overdue wakeup call for US foreign policy, but I’m going to focus on the even more frightening domestic scene.

..... She says: “Today, no group in America feels comfortably dominant. Every group feels attacked, pitted against other groups not just for jobs and spoils but for the right to define the nation’s identity.” (p. 177) For example, many blacks believe that America “has been since its founding built on unceasing violence, abuse, and terror against black Americans” (p. 174) while “half of Republicans believe there is a lot or some discrimination against whites, but so do nearly 30% of Democrats” (p. 171). Also “just 24% of whites believe the next generation would be better off financially or the same as their parents, compared to 49% of blacks and 62% of Latinos.” (p. 173), with statistics showing that “educational prospects for poor white children are extremely bleak.” (p 171).

In the past, Chua points out, “King’s ideals transcended group divides” and “the international human rights movement deliberately elevated individual rights as opposed to group rights”. (pp. 178 – 179). Now “a shift in tone, rhetoric, and logic has moved identity politics away from inclusion – which had always been the Lefts’ byword - toward exclusion and division” (p. 183). Even Kimberlie Crenshaw, the creator of “intersectionality” now says that this word has become “identity politics on steroids”, dividing people into every more specific subgroups. (p. 184).

I have felt this personally: I’ve long been an advocate for “justice”, but over the last couple of years I’ve sensed a shift in the word “justice” that has made me uncomfortable. I finally realized it is because advocacy for group justice is now threatening, not embracing, the common good. Then I found out that I was behind the times - that the Right had already coined “social justice warrior” as a pejorative phrase. And when I asked experts how to connect with evangelical churches to support the Green New Deal, I was directed to language that said to use the word “fairness” instead of “justice”.

Meanwhile on the Right “white identity politics has mobilized around the idea of whites as an endangered, discriminated-against group”, “having gotten a tremendous boost from the Left, whose relentless berating, shaming, and bullying might have done more damage than good” (p. 189).. However “only 4% of Americans support white nationalism” (p. 193), so extreme rhetoric does not yet command a wide following. Chua challenges us to stop this extremism in its tracks before it gets out of hand, reminding us of how America has overcome divisions in the past. She says, “what is needed is one on one engagement” (p. 201) to overcome stereotypes and that “we need collectively to find a national identity capacious enough to ...hold together as one people, Americans of all sorts” (p. 203).

Finally, Chua really lays it on the line: “Purveyors of political tribalism, on both the Left and the Right, may think they are defending American values, but in fact they are playing with poison.” “The peril we face as a nation today is not only that America might fail to live up to its promise, but Americans might stop believing in that promise or the need to fight for it. The increasing belief on the Left that this promise was always a lie, or on the right that it has always been true, ...are two sides of the same coin.” (p. 204)