
BOOK REVIEW

Chua, Amy, *Political Tribes; Group Instinct and the Fate of Nations*, New York: Penguin Press/ Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018, 292 pages.

This book offers an interesting explanation of the problems faced by the American policy makers in Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Venezuela as well as in the realm of domestic politics. Each time they failed to read the prevalence of tribalism on the ground. Amy Chua has offered convincing arguments in a very simple and fluid style. To establish her point, she has presented individual case studies of the aforementioned countries and how Washington failed to read communitarian fault lines. She cites scientific studies that deal with the phenomenon of group instinct coupled with personal observations extracted from the conversations she held with students hailing from different ethnic backgrounds. Moreover, there is a variety of primary and secondary data ranging from news stories to the analyses from books, articles, blogs and op-eds.

Chua asserts that tribalism, the urge to belong and feel attachment to a group, is embedded in human nature so much so that human beings will defend it even at the cost of their own benefits. This basic instinct is at work in almost all political conflicts. The US foreign policy however remained oblivious to this reality by viewing, for example, the situation in Vietnam as a struggle between “Communism” vs. “free world”. Likewise, after ousting Saddam Hussein, the US policy makers ignored the intense Shia-Sunni divide in Iraq and naively assumed that democratization would be a panacea for all Iraqi problems. On the domestic front, the US elites completely disregarded the role of group and racial identities in politics and, therefore, were caught off guard when Donald Trump won the presidency.

The author attributes the American group blindness in the foreign policy realm to the “American exceptionalism” i.e. in contrast to any other country in the world, European or non-European, America is a ‘super group’. In this ‘super group’ people coming from different ethnic or

national backgrounds melt into a single identity. Despite having a racially turbulent history, the US has successfully assimilated large number of immigrants “through free markets, democracy, inter-marriage and individualism”. Nevertheless, the American policy makers mistakenly assumed that this group blindness for the sake of nationalism would be found in every other country, and that all Iraqis despite being Sunni, Shia or Kurd would yearn to become just an Iraqi. They further miscalculated that democratization would help create a national sense of unity and people would give up their group love for the sake of liberal ideals. However, democracy only deepened the already dangerous ethnic/sectarian rifts.

In her analysis of Vietnam, the author states that Vietnam and its people have had a long and fierce history of bitterness against the Chinese. The Vietnamese have always struggled to escape the yoke of Chinese influence. In Vietnam, thanks to their vast capital the ethnic Chinese minority benefited from free markets, which naturally increased resentment in majority Vietnamese. Here, the author coins the term “market-dominant minorities”. The US erroneously assessed China as a contributor to anti-American hostility in North Vietnam. This is how a limited cold war perspective converted potential allies into enemies. Similarly, the South Vietnamese had little moral motivation to fight their own clan members. All this resulted in humiliation for the United States of America. Similar ethnocentrism was at work in Afghanistan. The conflict in Afghanistan was not just about Taliban. The Tajiks and Uzbeks resent the majority Pashtun. During the Soviet and American interventions in Afghanistan, the Pashtuns felt an acute sense of alienation. Hence, Mullah Umar used the Pashtun identity to gather support, and, in fact, the Taliban were an ethnically Pashtun force.

Iraq’s example is the most disastrous one as it resulted in the creation of ISIS. The author illustrates why President Bush’s assumption of guiding Iraq on the lines of post-war Germany and Japan ended in chaos. It was only in 2006 that the US military overcame its lack of ethnic/sectarian knowledge and began to formulate strategies that took various social cleavages into consideration. However, similar group blindness continued in the political policies, thus limiting prospects of success. Besides, irreparable damage had already been done.

In chapter five, titled, "Terror Tribes", the author, with the help of scientific studies, dissects the psychology of group instinct and how it can lead decent individuals towards rationalization of extremely inhumane acts of terror. These studies show that group instinct causes in-group members to over rate the virtues and performances of the member of their own group and de-humanize the out-group members, generalizing their negative traits. Also, the natural feeling of sympathy for any other human being suffering from pain increases two-fold when the victim belongs to in-group. What is disturbing is that people tend to enjoy the sufferings of an out-group member if there is a history of violence between the groups concerned. Under the sway of group instinct, people descent very low on the moral ladder even when their personal preferences show a higher standard. The group members usually punish, in various ways, those in-group members who dare to be different. Through these insights, the author has tried to explain how the cruelty of ISIS is rationalized by its members. Furthermore, she also attributes terrorism to poverty, not individual poverty, but "group inequality" causing group resentment.

In further chapters, the author discusses the case of Venezuela where the market dominant minority caused antipathy among less privileged majority. Previously famous for having no ethnic divisions, Venezuela in particular and Latin America in general is actually divided into complex ethnic and social classes based on economic privileges. In this case, the white skinned people were seen as the favored class. Hugo Chávez exploited this ethnic dynamic of his country and garnered mass appeal, for he looked like them. The US, again being group blind, failed to execute a successful foreign policy with regards to Venezuela, damaging its reputation in the region.

In the last two chapters, the author digs deep into the tribalism that has been raising its head in the United States by explaining different social groups in which the American society is divided into, many of them not quite in limelight. She cites the famous "occupy wall street" as a movement led by educated and relatively privileged Americans, lacking enough representation of the poor class. The poor of America, on the other hand are relatively inactive in political activism, but they still fit in certain social groups that offer them not only a sense of belonging but also a catharsis for their grievances. The key to decipher Trump's rise to presidency lies within these groups. Attributing the rise of divisive politics in America to

race, she states the growing anxiety among white Americans is largely caused by the perceptions that they will soon be a racial minority. Although some decades earlier, the white Americans were welcoming the immigrants, they now feel threatened by the changing demographics. They are even lead to believe that whites are discriminated against and are not getting their fair share in the society. Due to special arrangements at colleges and work places to include racial minorities, they're being left behind. This explains the rise of populist politics in America. But, on the other hand, the minority groups' fears have in no way lessened. After Trump's election, they feel even more threatened. These groups include African-Americans, Muslims, Latinos, women and people of different sexual orientations. In a nutshell, every single group in America has started feeling unsafe and defenseless, dragging the society into political tribalism. She then discusses why the Left, previously 'color-blind' turned its path towards 'identity politics', and why the Right which too was in a sense color-blind and individualistic turned towards white-identity politics. It may seem to an American leftist reader that the author leans too heavily on the right and vice-versa. In fact she has tried to make sense of why someone is where he/she is and has tried to reconcile both of their positions.

As much the scenario sketched in the book seems bleak, it ends on a positive note. The author claims to be very hopeful for there are groups and people trying their best to foster unity instead of division. She has put forward two major solutions. Firstly, there is need to create more and more arenas of one-on-one engagement, not just superficial exposures but meaningful interactions. This helps people understand each other as human beings. Secondly, she calls on the political partisans to shun their hateful narratives as it tears the country further apart, doing no good. She acknowledges not only the fears of the right but the services of the left in bringing the truth to light, and hence both groups should work together for the much revered 'American dream'.

Though the book builds its argument within an American context, it is a useful read for anyone trying to understand the factors that divide societies, and how group instinct can damage the cause of peace.

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