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Most people aren't happy with what public debate is becoming

We need to talk to those who disagree with us and find what can bridge both sides of the political spectrum instead of alienating one

To those wondering whether cockfighting is a thing of the past, politics provides an answer. It's an emphatic no. From the US to India, to Hungary, Turkey and Argentina, in liberal and less liberal democracies, major parties seem to be defined by one objective: inflicting maximum injury to their rivals. This paradigm has implications for political strategising. It makes it less about expanding your constituency than about mobilising your base, and more about sloganeering than persuading. It's a 'tribal' paradigm — and both sides feed the polarisation.

But this phenomenon isn't confined to the realm of politics. If you look at human rights activism, you'll realise that targeting unaffiliated citizens isn't the most popular strategy anymore. Many activists seem to prefer hammering out already-packaged messages to uncompromising constituents over reasoned advocacy — another way of saying: 'preaching to the converted'.

I won't make a strawman by claiming that this is all modern activism is about – it isn't – but 'tribal impulses' are gaining ground. How did we get here?

The mechanics of radicalisation

Brexit and Trump's successful campaigns in 2016 set the parameters for strategies that now surround us: Repeat slogans. Use binaries. Eliminate grey areas. Demonise opponents. Make compromise impossible. Don't seek truth — assert your own. Bring your base to a boiling point. Make *prevailing* your compass and *owning the other side* your aphrodisiac.

This kind of opposition politics kills the possibility of accepting even measured criticism and encourages groupthink. In this context, the most

powerful driver of mobilisation isn't promoting your ideas: it's opposing the other side. Reflexive posturing is an 'us vs. them' mindset, whereby opponents are enemies, personal attacks become the norm, and the end justifies the means.

Like gamecocks, then, members of each side get obsessed with inflicting severe wounds on the enemy. It's not single-issue campaigning, however. It's worse: it's *super-single-issue* campaigning taking alarmism to an existential level — the belief that compromise is ruled out since your enemies are beyond persuasion.

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In this sense, Trump managed to turn not only the conservative base but also large swathes of the left (and its shadow parties, activist circles) into 'tribespeople'. In human rights campaigns or fundraisers, you find esoteric language, hyperboles, dogmatism, and *reductiones ad Hitlerum* (inflationary uses of the word 'fascist' ultimately devalue it). You also find outrage, censoriousness, and messages designed to pander to followers and paint the image of a monolithic group opposing 'evil'. If you add to this callout culture, you get the perfect recipe for ever-increasing animosity… and for failure (moralising is one of the least effective advocacy techniques).

But that's not it. As social media rewards the most radical posts, people train themselves to be inflexible. Nothing is ever radical enough, and social media's incentive structure leads active users to be ever more aggressive. It's a deadly spiral.

As in politics, the effect on human rights activism is noxious. Since the focus is on your own camp rather than others, soon enough, internal dynamics get the upper hand. In this theatre, *intra-group* competition becomes the centreline and inter-group competition takes a backseat. Ideological conformity becomes more important than interactions with the outside world. 'MAGA' crowds or Modi fans — sure, but the tragedy is it's a trap we all risk falling in.

A fatal mistake for rights activism

What may occasionally work for political parties won't for rights groups. Unlike parties, their goal isn't to exercise power: it's to protect universal rights. They're not supposed to serve a camp but to build bridges, talk to

everyone. And they're not supposed to blame voters for voting the 'wrong' way or citizens for thinking the 'wrong' things.

What consequences do activists face when they adopt the 'don't expand your constituency, mobilise your base' paradigm? First, the focus on belonging to the 'tribe' leads to retreating into an echo chamber, where a small range of core issues occupy all the space. This process has a side effect: allergy to disagreement. The irony is that advocacy is the opposite of an echo chamber — it's trying to convince people who don't necessarily agree with you in the first place. Constantly signalling your belonging in the group, however, becomes a turn-off for those outside of it, feeding the anti-rights backlash.

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But there's more. When allegiance to the group becomes the most important act a member can perform, illiberalism is looming. Those who speak louder get to define the terms of the debate. They make moderation look like betrayal, compromise like surrender. They demand blind commitment to the group and blind hatred for the enemy. Instead of being seen as a tool to find truth, then, viewpoint diversity becomes anathema. The 'marketplace of ideas' gives way to a monopoly. Free citizens become captive customers. At this point, for group members, the fear of exhibiting doubt and pressures for conformity create a fake consensus grounded in self-censorship. As a result, the 'tribe' has distorted views of the enemy, of the world and of itself. Unlike systems based on free speech, such a system cannot correct itself.

I've seen the evolution. In human rights circles, many now refrain from sharing contents that challenge the dominant discourse, as it might be seen as playing into the hands of the 'wrong' people. It's as if people were unwilling to talk about anything other than the weather. For fear of being labelled anything from 'not an ally' to 'reactionary', fewer and fewer activists engage in debates on substantial issues or strategies.

Third, societal polarisation increases as core issues, which exercise a monopoly over intra-group conversations, are usually the most divisive topics. We're talking about 'culture wars' (abortion, immigration, policing…), gender and generational divides and emotional rhetoric: when you make it all about existential threats and identity, you make

everything essential and personal. You make defeat look like humiliation. As binaries ('woke left vs. alt right') and what goes with them (Manichaeism and insults) are perfect for social media's business model, algorithms promote this type of content.

If activism doesn't resist the 'tribal paradigm' and political strategies that stem from it, it will lose its ability to convince anyone who isn't already convinced.

When you spend time on social media, surreptitiously, you start thinking that others fall into two categories: those who are in complete agreement with you, and those who want to destroy your 'tribe'. *Any* criticism is equated with an attack, so you shut off and succumb to the sweet fantasy of having to deal only with people who think like you (or pretend that they do).

Last, single-issue campaigning is eminently unstable. A narrow platform defined by reflexive opposition is unwelcoming of recruits, and thus fragile: since constituents are hellbent on fighting the other side, any impression that group leaders are faltering results in mobilisation problems. (Look at Biden's approval ratings among Arab-Americans: they're an inverse function of casualties in Gaza, and this is now a cause for concern). Disappointment translates into silent retaliation – abstaining, opting out of activism – and the issue becomes about minimising defections (arguably as big a headache as attracting new supporters).

My point isn't that 'tribalism' is taking over all forms of activism. It's that if activism doesn't resist the 'tribal paradigm' and political strategies that stem from it, it will lose its ability to convince anyone who isn't already convinced.

Breaking the cycle

Most people aren't happy with what public debate is becoming. We all have a responsibility to fight back. The most urgent task is to appeal to universal values and speak a universal language. It means more than resisting injunctions to be 'tribal' — seeing individuals before groups and human beings before categories. It means rehabilitating self-doubt, critical inquiry and constructive dissent. Collectively, open debate is our surest way of avoiding error.

We should also fight single-issue thinking — identify where bridges can be built and remember that most people are unaligned (moderate, heterodox, not ready to go to war over politics). To do this, we should get rid of unpleasant advocacy tools and methods: cancel culture, virtue-

signalling, character assassination and social media mob justice.

Re-focusing on working-class issues and economic inequality would go a long way in rebuilding the trust that's been lost.

Additionally, we should refrain from systematically tailoring messages for captive audiences, that is, we should avoid 'packaged-to-please' slogans. We need to reach out, find new ways of talking to people who disagree with us, and find what in the human rights discourse can appeal to both sides of the political spectrum instead of alienating one — the idea of progress and justice, for the left; protection of individuals against the state, for the right; autonomy and dignity, for all.

Finally, finding an antidote to the 'tribal poison' means addressing the social question. This should be clear, as left-wing parties have been bleeding support among their traditional constituents — many of whom have found refuge in abstention or moved to the far right. It almost sounds horrible to say this: a bit less on racial and gender issues (at least through current forms of activism) and a bit more on economic issues is needed. Re-focusing on working-class issues and economic inequality would go a long way in rebuilding the trust that's been lost.

There's still reason for hope. Offline, most people are able to talk to each other, and being constructive brings better results. For all activists, this should be an adage.



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