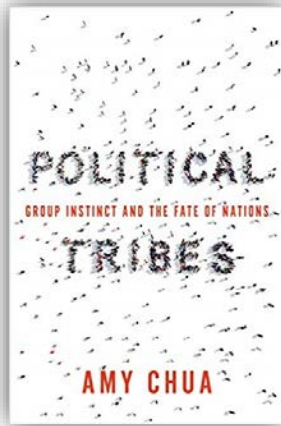


BOOK REVIEW

Political Tribes: Group Instinct and the Fate of Nations

By Amy Chua

Reviewed by Rainier Lee



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Amy Chua's *Political Tribes* is structured on the premise that humans are naturally tribal. Meaning, Chua assumes that through history, humanity has exhibited divisional tendencies that base themselves in divisional group-instinct. Chua illustrates this notion through multiple case studies of American political involvement both within its domestic borders and abroad. Hence, with examples from Vietnam, the Middle East, and the United States of America, Chua demonstrates the power ethnicity plays in dividing countries and establishing paradigm constructs based on national identity.

Starting with Vietnam, Chua centers her attention on the small Chinese minority called the Hoa. The Hoa had historically dominated the Vietnamese economically until the communists take over. Chua positions the Hoa within the United States' involvement in Vietnam. Chua concludes that, ignoring cultural relativism, the United States military failed to recognize the importance of ethnic division and tribal identity among the Vietnamese people(47) The failure to acknowledge the hatred of the majority towards the Hoa was instrumental in America losing popular support from the Vietnamese. The American

government assumed that they could unite the diverse Vietnamese under the banner of capitalism. They did not realize that the power they gave to the Hoa situated America as a foreign ruler in alliance with the established elite. In other words, ethnicity based on historical circumstances was stronger than the economic ideology of capitalism.

Chua then focuses her attention on recent American involvement in other countries through the war on terror. In similar fashion to her critique of American foreign policy in Vietnam, Chua states, "the Taliban is not only an Islamist movement but also an ethnic movement. The vast majority of its members are Pashtuns" (60) Paralleling her case study of Vietnam, Chua illustrates how the ethnic Pashtuns of the region have historically governed its political climate. From Mullahs fighting the imperial British to Soviet Russians, it was Pashtuns who have always dominated the Afghan region. The Taliban's power structure, according to Chua, is based less on the religious formation of radicalism than it is on ethnicity. She then concludes that "we [Americans] recast the Taliban as a bunch of cave-dwelling mullahs and once again failed to see the central importance of ethnicity" (70-71)

Finally, Chua spotlights Iraq. When democracy was introduced to the Iraqi people, what was once a Sunni minority that controlled politics shifted to Shi'ite led political coalitions(78). When this happened, the Sunni elite who historically dominated the military of Iraq found themselves out of power. Again the United States, according to Chua, failed to understand ethnicity and cultural relativism within Iraq. American democracy in Iraq magnified its ethno-religious divisions. Instead of individuality-based democracy, voting blocks formed out of identity politics. Through the process, many Sunni felt neglected. This gave rise to ISIS, who follow Islamic fundamentalism that is specific to their Sunni sect.

In closing her argument, Chua positions America's foreign geopolitical involvement within an overall critique of American tribalism in the era of Trump(166). Chua concludes that the growing divisions based on American identity politics as harmful to the

different ideology of Americanism. In that sense, Chua's *Political Tribes* is not only an illustration of the adverse effects of tribalism. It is also a call for Americans to once again unite under a nationalism that is inclusive to all citizens of America. This would be a nationalism based in differences, but also on similarities. In Chua's words, "if we're to come together as a nation, we all need to elevate ourselves. We need to find a way to talk to each other if we're to have any chance of bridging divides" (207).

Directed to an American audience in a time of partisan politics, Chua's deconstruction of tribalism adds knowledge to the fields of both anthropology and theology as specified in the On Knowing Humanity (OKH) project's purpose. The tribalism of humanity illustrates that humans seek community. People form tribes, tribes form associations, and associations form nations. Layered within these notions are diverse groupings that base themselves on shared race, ethnicity, religion, and gender.

The OKH project advocates joining anthropological with theological knowledges, which offers insight into Chua's notion of tribalism. Christianity affirms that we live in a fallen world in need of redemption. Not only does Christian theology position humanity within the circumstance of sin, but it also provides an answer through Jesus Christ. Jesus, the hope of the world, brings shalom to humanity through salvation to all tribes, nations, and tongues. This unifying concept takes down the barriers of group divisions as it assumes that everyone is created in the image of God.

Thus, the OKH's advocacy can bring theological insight into our understanding of tribalism. Humans have a tendency to try to establish power over other groups. This notion is explained through the concept of sin; we live in a fallen world of partisans. Dissimilar to Chua who concludes that American national idealism is the answer, Christianity assumes that only Christ's salvific message of hope and peace can unite humanity and alleviate its destructive tendencies. Nationalism, or any other ideology, is based on an attempt to bring a people together under one banner, but in doing so it alienates other groups. Christianity, however, through its universalism, views all humanity as made in the image of God, a much stronger basis for countering tribalism than is Chua's nationalism.



Rainier Lee is a student in the MA in Theological and Cultural Anthropology at Eastern University. He has research interests in social media's effect on culture, specifically how communities organize within its platforms. Rainier also enjoys studying British colonial history and current political movements.

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