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Book Review

Political Tribes: Group Instinct and the Fate of Nations

Amy Chua, Penguin US. 2019. 293 pages.

Introduction

In Political Tribes: Group Instinct and the Fate of Nations (2019), Professor Amy Chua offers a sobering diagnosis of modern politics: that identity, not ideology or economics, is the fundamental driver of human behavior and political destiny. The book is both a critique of American liberal universalism and an exposition of how group loyalties—whether ethnic, religious, cultural, or class-based—continue to shape political outcomes around the world. For Chua, the repeated failure of U.S. foreign interventions and the deepening polarization within its own borders can be traced to a persistent blindness toward these primal group instincts.

This article critically examines Chua's thesis by analyzing the philosophical foundations of her argument, assessing its empirical validity, and questioning its relevance to societies such as Malaysia. It provides a distinctive perspective that transcends conventional critiques of American arrogance and examines the epistemological and civilizational premises that inform Chua's worldview. This review emphasizes the Southeast Asian experience, specifically the Malaysian context, to offer an alternate interpretation of political tribalism—recognizing its influence while highlighting its institutional controllability and transformational capacity.

Tribalism as Political Blind Spot

Chua's central premise is that political elites, especially in the West, operate with a flawed assumption of human nature—one that sees individuals as primarily rational, self-interested actors rather than group-embedded beings. This epistemological error, she argues, explains why liberal democracies consistently fail to understand the true nature of conflict in the global South.

In Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Venezuela, U.S. foreign policy has been influenced by a conviction in the universality of liberal values. In Vietnam, it misconstrued a nationalist fight as a conflict between communism and liberty. In Iraq, it is presumed that democracy may be established in a country fragmented by Sunni, Shia, and Kurdish divides. In Afghanistan, it overlooked the influence of tribal family structures on governance and loyalty. The outcome was not merely unsuccessful nation-building but also the empowerment of antagonistic tribal entities that were never included in the liberal initiative from the first.

Domestically, Chua extends the same logic to explain the rise of Donald Trump and the cultural backlash against globalist elites. She argues that America has become a tribal society itself, split between cosmopolitan, college-educated urbanites and a resentful, working-class white population who feel culturally alienated and economically betrayed. Both groups, she argues, exhibit tribal behavior—defining themselves not just by policy preferences but by their emotional allegiance to group identity.

Theoretical Elasticity or Conceptual Vagueness?

While Chua's narrative is compelling, it is also methodologically thin. Her broad use of the term "tribe" to describe everything from ethnic groups to political coalitions to elite classes dilutes its analytical value. There is a risk of collapsing very different forms of identity—primordial, constructed, symbolic—into a single explanatory category. This creates both insight and confusion.

On one hand, her expansive use of "tribalism" helps draw attention to the emotional and psychological dimensions of politics often ignored by rational-choice models. On the other hand, her failure to distinguish between different forms of group identity leaves unanswered key questions: Why do some tribal formations lead to violence while others produce stable pluralism? What conditions turn identity into exclusion rather than solidarity?

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In avoiding theoretical formalism, Chua may be prioritizing accessibility, but at the cost of analytical clarity. While the book offers excellent storytelling, it does not provide a structured typology or causal model to guide comparative analysis. Still, its value lies in unsettling the complacency of political liberalism and forcing readers to confront the non-rational dimensions of political life.

Market-Dominant Minorities and the Politics of Resentment

A key contribution of the book is its revival of the "market-dominant minority" thesis, which Chua originally articulated in World on Fire (2002). She argues that in many developing countries, small ethnic minorities—often diasporic Chinese, Lebanese, or Indian communities—control a disproportionate share of wealth, breeding resentment among the indigenous majority.

This framework is especially relevant for understanding the political economy of plural societies like Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines. In such contexts, democracy can empower the aggrieved majority to politically challenge economically entrenched minorities. The result is often ethnic scapegoating, populist nationalism, or redistributive policies that simultaneously address inequality and deepen ethnic polarization.

While Chua's diagnosis is powerful, it leans heavily on an economic determinism that overlooks the role of ideology, religion, and language in shaping ethnic boundaries. Moreover, it underplays the role of state policy in managing or exacerbating such tensions. The assumption that ethnic resentment is inevitable wherever economic disparities exist fails to account for cases where inclusive nationalism or effective redistributive mechanisms have fostered stability despite inequality.

Relevance for Malaysia and Beyond

Amy Chua's Political Tribes offers powerful insights for multicultural societies grappling with identity politics, and few countries exemplify this struggle more intimately than Malaysia. While Chua's work is centered on the failures of U.S. foreign policy and the fracture of its domestic unity, her framework of "tribalism"—particularly the concept of "market-dominant minorities"—invites deeper reflection within the Malaysian sociopolitical context.

Malaysia, like many postcolonial states, is built upon negotiated pluralism, where political stability rests on delicate ethnic compromises. The post-1969 architecture of the Malaysian state, especially the introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP), was explicitly designed to address the economic dominance of the Chinese minority and the political marginalization of the Malay majority. In this regard, Chua's warning about liberal democracy exacerbating ethnic resentment rings with eerie familiarity. In fact, Malaysia's political engineering can be seen as a preemptive response to precisely the kind of instability that Chua describes when liberalism fails to account for group identity.

However, Malaysia's experience also highlights the limits of Chua's thesis. Contrary to the view that tribalism is an unstoppable and irrational force, the Malaysian case demonstrates that identity can be mediated through formal institutions, ideological instruments (such as Bangsa Malaysia or Keluarga Malaysia or more recent one, Malaysia Madani), and distributive mechanisms. The state's ability to contain, co-opt, and regulate ethnic sentiment, albeit imperfectly; suggests that identity politics is not merely a product of deep-seated tribal instinct but also of political choices and elite narratives.

Moreover, Chua's characterization of identity as primarily conflictual overlooks the role of identity in fostering civic engagement, social capital, and intergroup solidarity. While Chua is rightly concerned with the dangers of group entrenchment, her framework does not fully account for the possibilities of cross-ethnic alliances and hybrid identities, which have emerged, for instance, in Malaysia's urban middle class and civil society movements. These developments challenge the fatalism often associated with tribalism and suggest that identity politics can also be harnessed for inclusive transformation.

In a broader Southeast Asian and Global South context, Political Tribes underscores the urgent need for models of governance that do not rely on Western liberal assumptions. For countries with plural demographics and colonial legacies, the challenge is not to suppress identity but to weave it into the national fabric through carefully calibrated

pluralism. Here, Malaysia, despite its own contestations; offers valuable lessons: that identity need not doom a nation to fragmentation, provided there is a sustained commitment to political accommodation, cultural recognition, and socioeconomic rebalancing.

Chua's work thus serves both as a cautionary tale and a heuristic device. It reveals what happens when identity is ignored but also compels us to ask what more can be done to transform identity from a source of division into a foundation for genuine democratic pluralism.

Conclusion

Amy Chua's Political Tribes is an important and timely intervention in contemporary political thought. It forces us to confront the deep-seated human need for belonging and group identity, exposing the limitations of a political order built solely on individualism and abstract rights. While its conceptual framework is broad and at times theoretically inconsistent, the book succeeds in re-centering identity as a core analytical category in both domestic and international politics.

For Malaysia and the wider postcolonial world, Political Tribes is not merely a diagnostic text but a mirror that reflects the perils and possibilities of pluralism. If identity is an unavoidable part of the political terrain, then the task is not to transcend it, but to institutionalize it in ways that promote justice, solidarity, and resilience. In this light, the challenge for scholars and policymakers alike is to move beyond the binary of tribalism versus universalism, and toward a more grounded, historically conscious, and ethically plural political imagination.

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