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Tribal Creatures

Review of 'Our tribal future:
How to channel our foundational human instincts into force of good.'
by David R. Samson

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"I assert," Hoca Camide said, "my individuality by choosing the collectives I want to be part of." "That way," Mufti Mufazel nodded approvingly, "you can eat your cake and have it too."
– The Book of Hoca

Human beings, Aristotle famously observed, are social, or rather political, creatures, which might be the same thing. What this entails has been the object of much study, enough to fill libraries. One branch of psychology, social psychology, is dedicated to finding the right questions to ask and to feeling its way toward answers (see Allport, 1924 for an early mission statement, and Forgas, 2022, for later ones). Other social sciences ask similar questions and collectively they use wide array of tools. Evolutionary anthropology, a curious hybrid science, contributes to these efforts. In his book *Our tribal future: How to channel our foundational human instincts into a force for good*, David Samson reaches for a broad-range synthesis to show readers where they have been, where they are going, and what makes them uniquely human. It is a strong effort, although not quite on a par with the magisterial works of Sapolsky (2017) or Christakis (2019).

Before considering some critical notes, it behooves us to recognize the book's merits. There is a great amount of interdisciplinary research and scholarship. Samson is erudite; there is much he has to offer and share. His book is well written, comprehensible, lively, and its messages are important. It is a good read, and I am happy to recommend it to my students.

In what ways does *Tribal Future* fall short in its mission? I have learned, in decades of reviewing books, to be alert to certain red flags. Here are four of them. First, a liberal use of neologisms suggests conceptual weakness. As Mephistopheles says to the curious student "*Doch ein Begriff muß bey dem Worte seyn*" [There must be a concept corresponding to the word]. And further, Mephisto declares that where concepts are lacking, a word readily presents itself. Samson coins many words and phrases, starting on the second line of the prologue: "I call this the Trust Paradox" (p. ix). All right, this particular term is not a new coinage (see James, 2002), and it appears to be a misnomer. Trust is necessary for survival, but it comes with ineliminable uncertainty. Hence, it is a dilemma rather than a paradox (Krueger & Evans, 2013). Two pages later, Samson introduces the Tribe Drive, a term intended to carry much of the explanatory load. Little conceptual work is offered to clarify

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what exactly a tribe is or what a drive is, or how we are driven and toward what end. Many neologisms follow. The last one appears in the Appendix. Here, Samson proposes some testable predictions following from “a novel idea I call *the Tribal Signaling Hypothesis* (p. 369, italics in the original).

Second, a liberal use of metaphor, simile, and analogy suggests theoretical thinness. By the end of the prologue, we are warned of “the modern epidemic of bad ideas” and the threats of “the tribe virus” (p. xiv). Metaphor need not entail hyperbole, but when it does, the quality of the writing suffers. The final metaphor is a nod to the myth of Cain, and the suggestion that humanity’s troubles reveal a *curse* (p. 367, italics in the original). “The indelible mark of Cain remains,” Samson warns darkly (p. 367). Of course, it does for this is what “indelible” means. When metaphors and stories proliferate, there is a danger of ending up with a hodgepodge. In the epilogue, titled “The Timeless Hero,” we encounter Lord Voldemort, Charles Darwin, Joseph Campbell, The Roman Empire and its military tactics, “heroic membrane-creating molecules” (p. 365), entropy, postmodernism, Genesis (with Cain), the Atomic Bomb, and Grima Wormtongue, whom I had to look up because I am not a Tolkienite. Now that’s a hodgepodge.

Third, a penchant for preaching detracts from scholarly purity. Scientists too can be puritanical, and the exorcism of the Holy Ghost is part of their birthright. Samson reveals that his “father was a shaman for his religious tribe”, a church that “was essentially a form of messianic Judaism” (p. 355). Samson broke away from this tribe and he is building his own, an intentional community of kindred spirits, about whom he says little. This is, as we later learn, because they have secrets. His prose emits the ecclesiastical legacy. This would not be objectionable, I think, were it not for two narratological devices – besides the liberal use of religio-theological metaphors – namely, an appeal to myths of origin and forays into the realm of eschatology. As to myths of origin, Samson relies heavily on research on contemporary hunter-gatherer societies, including the East African Hadza, where he himself has done much field research. To the few remaining autochthonous hunter-

gatherer societies, camps (small), bands (midsize), and tribes (largish) are the prevailing modes of social organization.

Alas, as most hunter-gatherer societies have disappeared, we may not know how much tribe-to-tribe variation in social organization has been lost along with them. Generalizations from contemporary camp life to the life to which our ancestors were adapted must remain uncertain. Yet, the temptation to infer the erstwhile existence of an evolutionary golden age, an age when evolved traits were matched with ecological demands and opportunities, is great. Religion relies on narratives describing an arc beginning with a golden-age myth, followed by some human-made catastrophe (the sin of hubris) and ever-worsening crises, and culminating in an orgy of destruction unless humanity learns how to save itself. The last leg of this journey is the eschatological one; it contains visions of the last things. Samson is comfortable with high-flown, prophetic language. In the prologue, he warns that an understanding of the science he is about to present “will be critical to the survival of our species” (p. xii), and he concludes the epilogue noting that “Our fate is uncertain. This great evil [of unbridled tribalism] may yet win” (p. 367). But there is hope because “we are the only Earthling species that has ever existed that knows what a major evolutionary transition is. Could this awareness be the source of our salvation?” And: “*Can we lift the curse?*” (p. 368, italics in the original). In short, Samson feels he has given us the tools to save ourselves; if we fail, whom will we have to blame?

The fourth and final red flag is the use of lists. Lists are exercises in enumeration. Their use reveals that there is not enough binding material in the story to make it cohere. Samson’s approach is list-like in that every chapter offers an impressive amount of material gathered from diverse disciplines with all but a tenuous sense of there being a progressively developing argument. Chapter 1 (“The Tribe Drive”) itself begins with a list of 14 lessons, from #1: “Group affiliation guides and drives reproduction” (p. 6) to #14: “Entire societies can be driven by the power of tribalism” (p. 13). Chapter 2 catalogs the horrors of social isolation; Chapter 3 addresses trust, cooperation, and small-group behavior; Chapter 3 ranges from Sheriff’s Robber’s Cave study to brain science and

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endocrinology. And so on. Most chapters upload a surplus of diverse material at the cost of compelling integration. This is a pity because much of the material is interesting indeed.

It's easy to get lost in this avalanche of ideas, metaphors, and findings. So, let's consider three provocative ideas more closely. First, there is the "Fitness-Beats-Truth (FBT theorem," which Samson pithily defines as "the claim that evolution by natural selection does not favor true perceptions; in reality, it drives them to extinction" (xiii). Now, if this is true and you get that, your prospects might be grim! Donald Hoffman's (2019) provocatively titled book "The case against reality: How evolution hid the truth from our eyes" would be the place to explore this claim in depth, or one might want to check the math in Prakash et al. (2021), who say they proved the theorem. Granted, it is not controversial that perception is underdetermined (Attneave, 1971), selective (Cherry, 1953), shaped by the needs of the species (Felin et al., 2017; Uexküll, 1934), and laced with added sensation of things that aren't there, like color (Barrett & Bar, 2009), but does this mean that perception is entirely unrealistic?

A male who accurately perceives honest signals of female fecundity will pass the fitness test by leaving offspring. This is not a problem because here, perceiving reality and perceiving it in a way that finds fitness are one. When, however, reality-oriented perception and fitness-oriented perception are pitted against each other, the argument goes, true perception is driven into extinction (see above). In this contest between reality and fitness, fitness wins by definition. If fitness perception is the predictor and fitness survival is the outcome, what would one expect? The question should rather be whether reality perception is a better predictor of reproduction than are other predictors, say self-enhancing biases. In many such contests, reality perception does well (see, e.g., Moore, 2020, on the victory of accurate self-confidence over overconfidence; reviewed by Krueger & Heck, 2021). If, however, reality is irrelevant, a perceptual alignment of individual with collective beliefs may be beneficial. If your tribespeople perceive the moon as an easily angered goddess, and if they organize their rituals around the need to appease her, it might be best to go along, and believe their mythical

nonsense if it gets you through the night. Yet, a statement like “*the probability that we see reality as it is equals zero*” (p. 128; italics in the original) is false, and I might add it is false with $p = 1.0$.

At last, Samson comes around to giving reality its due. He has to do so in order to support his claim that we should fight the dark side of tribalism with critical thinking, vigilance to misinformation, and the cultivation of a cognitive immune system to eject mental parasites (more metaphors). We should, Samson counsels, “(i) test ideas, (ii) harbor reservations, and (iii) revise opinions” (p. 344). He kicks open the backdoor for the Reverend Bayes, and with the Rev reality perception re-enters (Pinker, 2021, reviewed in Krueger, 2022).

Now, let’s consider the “evolutionary mismatch” problem. This is a deep one. I can’t solve it, but I can show that Samson’s treatment is insufficient. There is an evolutionary mismatch when a trait that has evolved and proven adaptive during the Pleistocene now yields deleterious results (Li et al., 2018). When carbohydrates were hard to come by, scarfing them up whenever they appeared was a good idea. Now, with the omnipresence of sugar, it is not. Yet, we still love sweets. Hence tooth decay and diabetes. In the Pleistocene, humans benefited from trust, cooperation, affiliation, and mutual aid among members of small groups. We still do. Yet, humans also evolved the capacity to use symbols to represent tribes, that is, fictive kinships. This was a good thing at the time as it facilitated trade and exogamy. Yet, with the invention of symbolic social categorization, the story goes, the door opened to the evils of discrimination, persecution, and the invasion of the Crimea, in other words, the dark side of tribalism (Forgas, in press). As we cannot go back and live like the Hadza, what is left is to ask the human mind, now that it has created a world in which it can no longer thrive, to re-design itself to become adapted to the new realities. This would be the ultimate evolutionary transition, at the cusp of which Samson says we are teetering.

There is no evidence that there ever was a species able to re-wire itself in order to be well adapted (Ken Miller, 2018, like Samson, thought it could be done; I do not; see my review in Krueger, 2018). The logic of natural selection does not allow it. When significant environmental changes occur that render certain traits maladaptive, these traits will fade in their prevalence, and if

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their **behavioral** results are truly devastating, they will take the species down with them. The standard complaint, shared by Samson, is that the human mind remains paleolithic and primitive. The same brain/mind that thanks to its sensational growth has led humans out of the stone-age and into an era in which this mind is itself becoming obsolete, handing control over to artificial intelligences. The hand-wringing over the great evolutionary mismatch is, in my view not productive. It invites the imagery of original sin and the yearning for salvation.

Although Samson may not fully succeed in constructing a master narrative of the human story, but he is persuasive when describing grass-roots efforts to re-invent small communities of interdependent, trusting, and trustworthy humans. He calls these efforts “camp-crafting,” which is a neologism I like. Samson explores why some of these efforts succeed while others fail, and here, I think, lies the most significant contribution of his book. If camp-crafting grows in appeal and economic viability, then there might be hope that societies that have tilted too far to the individualist pole of social organization may regain a healthy equilibrium.

Which brings us to the third and final idea, which is the tension between the individual and the collective, between individuation and immersion in the group (Krueger et al., 2022; see also the epigraph of this review). This tension is a theme that has pervaded the social sciences beginning with the works of Durkheim, Gumplowicz, Tönnies, among others. Samson relies on the recently popular distinction between tight and loose cultural norms and tight vs loose personality structures that go with that (Gelfand et al., 2011). The dangers of the extremes, being too tight or too loose, are well-documented. The challenge remains to find a salutary balance.

Tribal Future presents many intriguing ideas pointing us in the direction of a sustainable tribal future. The book contains many treasures, and my overall assessment, the four flags of criticism notwithstanding, remains overall positive.

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