

Political Tribes: Group Instinct and the Fate of Nations, by Amy Chua, Penguin Press, 2018, 304 pp., \$28.00 hardbound.

Tribalism, By Any Other Name

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Amy Chua, known both affectionately and derogatively as “Tiger Mom” after her highly acclaimed *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (2011), is a law professor at Yale Law School and an expert on globalization and international business transactions. She has the impeccable credentials of the typical law professor: Harvard University, Harvard Law School, clerkship with a federal appellate judge, and private practice experience at a Wall Street law firm. Her first book, *World On Fire*, coined the term “market-dominant minorities” to refer to “ethnic minorities who, for widely varying reasons, tend under market conditions to dominate economically, often to a startling extent, the ‘indigenous’ majorities

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around them.”¹ Certain minority populations, this theory runs, exert disproportionate control over their regional economy, fomenting in the process group backlash, resentment, and tribalism among those impoverished majorities who feel disenfranchised or marginalized.

The theme of market-dominant minorities underlies Chua’s latest book, *Political Tribes: Group Instinct and the Fate of Nations*, which examines domestic identity politics and the effects of foreign identity politics on U.S. foreign policy. Chua’s focus on tribalism, that instinctual tendency of humans to associate around shared norms, values, histories, customs, and traditions, holds together what feels like two different arguments: the one about culture at home and the other about foreign policy.

The less original of the two involves foreign policy. Five of Chua’s eight chapters can be reasonably reduced to a simple conclusion: American military intervention and capitalism did not succeed in Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq, Venezuela, and elsewhere because they were predicated on ideals that did not square with local, on-the-ground realities. In

¹Amy Chua, *World On Fire* (First Anchor Books, 2014), p. 6.

short, American values could not be universalized; presuming their viability in complex ethnic or tribal conflicts abroad led to disastrous consequences. Although she doesn't cite him, her theme seems Hayekian: faraway experts cannot rationally design workable systems for the particular circumstances that are intelligible only to those with native knowledge.

Chua's account of domestic tribalism and identity politics, on the other hand, is premised on the claim that America, historically, has been a "super-group." A super-group is characterized by membership that "is open to individuals from all different backgrounds—ethnic, religious, racial, cultural." Moreover, "a super-group does not require its members to shed or suppress their subgroup identities." Rather, "it allows those subgroup identities to thrive, even as individuals are bound together by a strong, overarching collective identity" (12).

Tribalism, Chua submits, is spreading throughout the United States, dividing people by racial and class identities. When people identify with and as groups, she argues, they see themselves as victims and respond to perceived threats by retreating into insularity, defensiveness, and punitiveness. Elites, as a tribe, disdain "the provincial, the plebian, [and] the patriotic." By contrast, "many

ordinary Americans have come to view the elite as a distant minority controlling the levers of power from afar, ignorant about and uninterested in 'real' Americans" (6-7).

Chua alleges that the United States has split into the "haves" and "have-nots," recognizable categories that are nevertheless crude. Although she describes several examples of groups that fall within these categories, her central concern is the difference between the progressive, elite, activist haves and the populist, patriotic have-nots. The former purport to speak for marginalized, underclass groups without actually including those groups as members. The latter embraces the prosperity gospel and watches NASCAR and WWE. The haves and have-nots, in this cartoonish illustration, represent "America's two white tribes," which have, she believes, turned against each other.

Chua seems correct about the alienation of white America in light of rapidly changing demographics and cultural norms. "For tens of millions of white Americans today," she says, "mainstream popular culture displays an un-Christian, minority-glorifying, LGBTQ America they can't and don't want to recognize as their country—an America that seems to exclude them, to treat them as the enemy" (173). Yet Chua is off-base in assuming that the United States is or ever was a super-group, let alone "the

only [super-group] among the major powers of the world.” She states: “We have forged a national identity that transcends tribal politics—an identity that does not belong to any subgroup, that is strong and capacious enough to hold together an incredibly diverse population, making us all American” (166). Her fear is that tribalism will cause America to lose “who we are.”

But who are “we”? Citizens of the United States? People who live within the territorial boundaries of the United States? People whose ancestors came from—where? She never clarifies. Are “we” unifying or coming apart the more diverse we become in terms of culture, religion, race, national origin, and so forth? Is it really an identity that holds us together? What about our Constitution, which, in the words of Albert Jay Nock, “recognizes no political boundaries, no distinctions of race or nation” in that “our allegiance to it takes precedence over every local or personal interest.”²

The fact is that America—both the idea and the geographical territory—has never truly been open to the kind of all-inclusive, harmonious diversity that Chua celebrates. The growing cultural chasm between New England and the South during the eighteenth

century does not seem to have transcended tribal politics. The economy of the yeoman farmer and eventually the plantation system with its chattel slavery in the nineteenth-century agricultural south stood in stark contrast to the busy industry of New England. During the Civil War, southerners in the Confederate States of America would not have identified as American while retaining a “sub-group” identity.

There are many Americas. The history of the United States consists of numerous conflicts over which and whose version of America should prevail. It’s true, of course, that the United States has enjoyed, to some extent, an “ethnicity-transcending national identity and . . . unusual success in assimilating people from diverse origins,” at least if the total number of immigrants and the fact that many of them do feel part of a larger America are any indication. But the existence of the National Origins Formula, in effect from 1921 to 1965, and the immigrant exclusion laws (e.g., the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882) suggest that the United States has, at times, been at least equally committed to keeping certain immigrants out of the country.

Treatment of immigrants in the United States has differed in kind and degree from region to region, city to city, and decade to decade. Thus, to purport that America has maintained

²Albert Jay Nock, *The Theory of Education in the United States* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1932), 1.

some uniform and constant attitude towards immigrants, immigration, cultural multiplicity, ethnic minorities, and religious variety is mistaken. The United States may have been comparatively better than other nations at instituting welcoming, tolerant laws and policies regarding immigrants, but it has, for better or worse, always been tribal. In other words, tribalism in this country is not a new problem necessitating sudden panic.

Chua seems to recognize this weakness in her case, acknowledging that “American politics have always been identity politics.” She adds: “If we define identity politics broadly, to include cultural and social movements based on group identities, then slavery and Jim Crow were forms of identity politics for white Americans, just as the suffragette movement at the turn of the twentieth century was for women.” If that’s true, then what’s so dangerously different now? How could she imply that things have gotten worse than they were during the Jim Crow era? Her response: “[A]t different times in the past, both the American Left and the American Right have stood for group-transcending values. Neither does today” (22).

One problem with this blanket assertion is what it doesn’t say, namely that those group-transcending values that have existed in certain periods were never identical or

homogenous across the United States, never part of a consistent narrative with which large swaths of the American population would agree. The imaginary utopian super-group America that Chua promotes and envisions is the product of myth. She recalls the airy, exhilarating rhetoric of the honorable St. Jean de Crèvecoeur, a French liberal aristocrat enthused by the democratic possibility inspired by the New World. Yet Crèvecoeur’s sentimentality was time bound, reflecting the Enlightenment excitement and optimistic mood out of which sprang the myth of the American Dream. The United States, however, has never been “a group in which membership is open to individuals of any background but that at the same time binds its members together with a strong, overarching, group-transcending collective identity.”

Myths express narrative truths about ourselves that we tell ourselves and others. The population of the United States has grown steadily and rapidly since the Founding era due to immigration, among other factors. Chua asserts that “[o]ver the centuries, through the alchemy of markets, democracy, intermarriage, and individualism, America has been uniquely successful in attracting and assimilating diverse populations,” and that “the United States has always been one of the most ethnically and religiously open countries in the

world.” She’s accurate by the measure of overall immigrant population and by the nature of our immigration laws in some respects during some periods. To be uniquely successful, however, is not to be fully or even consistently successful.

Perhaps the most unifying idea behind America, the sentiment that more than others achieved national solidarity, involved antimonarchy; for to become American has not required proof of bloodline, feudal hierarchy, or title. Still, for most of our nation’s history, immigration has originated from European nations, where monarchy was slow to dissolve and still exists in residual forms. And if you wanted to climb the social ladder, it didn’t hurt to belong to certain families: the Adamses, the Quincys, the Appletons, the Harrisons, the Cabots, the Lodges, the Roosevelts, the Holmeses, the Thayers, the Coolidges, the Rockefellers, the Peabodys, the Kennedys, the Bushes. America has lacked kings and queens, but it has erected *de facto* aristocracies.

The linguistic history of the United States might lend substance to Chua’s thesis about anti-tribalism and the possibility of immigrant incorporation into American civic life. Early America was a polyglot society, but the United States did not become a polylingual nation. In the contest for primacy among native dialects—Spanish in Florida and the southwest, French

in Louisiana, Dutch in New York, German in Pennsylvania, and the multiple languages of immigrants from China or Japan, Italy or South America—English won out as the common tongue. Yet Chua isn’t talking about language when she extols America the super-group; she ignores arguably the most important corroborating evidence that supports her premise.

Chua sounds, in her anti-tribalism, more like a sanctimonious Barack Obama than our Founding Fathers. Obama’s 2016 speech to the Democratic National convention cast then-candidate Donald Trump, and by implication his supporters, as un-American. “[T]hat is not the America I know,” Obama said of Trump’s speech to the Republican National Convention the week before.³ He continued:

The America I know is decent and generous . . . I see Americans of every party, every background, every faith who believe that we are stronger together—black, white, Latino, Asian, Native American; young, old; gay, straight; men, women, folks with disabilities, all pledging allegiance, under the same proud flag, to this big,

³Full text of Barack Obama’s speech available in the *Los Angeles Times*: <http://www.latimes.com/politics/la-na-pol-obama-2016-convention-speech-transcript-20160727-snap-story.html>.

bold country that we love.
That's the America I know!⁴

This America that Obama knows was not known by George Washington, John Adams, or Thomas Jefferson. But what of Hamilton, the musical-inspiring “immigrant” from the British West Indies, who rose through the military ranks in service to Washington, eventually becoming a prominent Founding Father? He asserted that

foreigners will generally be apt to bring with them attachments to the persons they have left behind; to the country of their nativity, and to its particular customs and manners . . . The influx of foreigners must, therefore, tend to produce a heterogeneous compound; to change and corrupt the national spirit; to complicate and confound public opinion; to introduce foreign propensities.⁵

Hamilton's conclusion? “The United States has already felt the evils of incorporating a large number of foreigners into their national mass; it has served very much to divide the

⁴“Read: President Obama's Speech at the Democratic Convention,” NPR, July 28, 2016. <https://www.npr.org/2016/07/28/487722643/read-president-obamas-speech-at-the-democratic-convention>.

⁵*The Papers of Alexander Hamilton: Vol. XXV July 1800 – April 1802*, edited by Harold C. Syrett (Columbia University Press, 1977), 496.

community and to distract our councils, by promoting in different classes different predilections in favor of particular foreign nations, and antipathies against others.”⁶ So Hamilton was a tribalist and nativist, after all.

What of the enlightened, homespun, and cosmopolitan Benjamin Franklin? He declared that

the number of white people in the world is proportionably [*sic*] very small. All *Africa* is black or tawny. *Asia* chiefly tawny. *America* (exclusive of the new comers) wholly so. And in *Europe*, the *Spaniards*, *Italians*, *French*, *Russians*, and *Swedes* are generally of what we call a swarthy complexion; as are the *Germans* also, the *Saxons* only excepted, who with the *English* make the principal body of white people on the face of the earth. I could wish their numbers were increased. And while we are, as I may call it, *scouring* our planet, by clearing *America* of woods, and so making this side of our globe reflect a brighter light to the eyes of inhabitants in *Mars* or *Venus*, why should we in the sight of superior beings, darken its people? why increase the sons of *Africa*, by planting them in *America*, where we have so fair

⁶*Ibid.*

an opportunity, by excluding all blacks and tawneys, of increasing the lovely white and red? But perhaps I am partial to the complexion of my Country, for such kind of partiality is natural to Mankind.⁷

Turns out Franklin was tribalist and nativist as well.

The super-group representation of America proclaimed by Obama and Chua is attributable to only a sliver of American history in the late twentieth century. It was after the Civil Rights Act of 1964, in Chua's view, when "America underwent [a] profound transformation: from a multiethnic nation into something even more unusual: a super-group" (27). But is it proper and anthropologically sound to define America by what amounts to around 22 percent of its history since 1776? Doing so could be a reason why some white Americans have, in Chua's words, asserted "ownership of the country's past" with a tribal attitude: "*We built this land of opportunity and invited you in, and now we're being demonized for its imperfections.*"

Myths idealize and romanticize truth, blurring the lines between fiction and reality. As a scholar, Chua ought to be in the business of ferreting out the truth rather than

distorting or glossing over it through mythmaking. She applauds the inclusiveness of America as a super-group without acknowledging the ironic implication that, *a fortiori*, those who disagree with her are wrong about their definition of America. Of valid conceptions of America that might seem tribal, or at least out of key with her postwar liberal revivalism, she has nothing favorable to say. She therefore opens herself up to criticism that will only compound rather than mitigate the tribalism she seeks to abate.

Chua betrays her own thesis: From a position of supposed authority, she presumes knowledge about the way ordinary people in the United States think about their country. She thereby reveals her own tribalism, to which she seems blind, and unwittingly presents herself as a member of the elite tribe that she so decries. With the wave of a hand, she lumps Americans into two undesirable categories, the haves and have-nots, never taking the time to explain whether and how these categories are permeable or inadequately representative of a diverse population with distinct experiences.

Despite her intended message of peaceable inclusivism, Chua might be misinterpreted as insisting that newcomers, local communities, and regional cultures give up their customs and traditions and embrace the assimilationist ethos that she

⁷Benjamin Franklin, *Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind, Peopling of Countries, Etc.* (New York Reprint: W. Abbatt, 1918), 224.

portrays as essential to American identity. She says, for instance, “we need to collectively find a national identity capacious enough to resonate with, and hold together as one people, Americans of all sorts—old and young, immigrant and native born, urban and rural, descendants of slaves as well as descendants of slave owners” (203). This is a beautiful but quixotic proposal, one that could require groups to abandon positions that are integral to their identity and *Weltanschauung*.

Chua’s proposal also raises questions about how much coercion she believes to be justified to stamp out opposition or dissent in the name of absolute inclusion. What reasonable thinker would in good faith disagree that “what is needed is one-on-one human engagement” (201), or that

“[w]hen people from different tribes see one another as human beings who at the end of the day want the same things—kindness, dignity, security for loved ones—hearts can change” (202)? The problem, of course, is translating that compassionate sentiment into official policy. People cannot be forced to love each other.

Anti-tribalism is tribal, i.e., a view embraced by certain elite groups in America without regard to the perspective of many ordinary Americans. *Political Tribes* suggests, therefore, that Chua is part of the problem: her type of tribalism is acceptable, others are not. A more convincing plea would acknowledge that the breezy cosmopolitanism Chua prefers is not accessible to all, and offer a more nuanced depiction of “Americanness” and its multiplicities.