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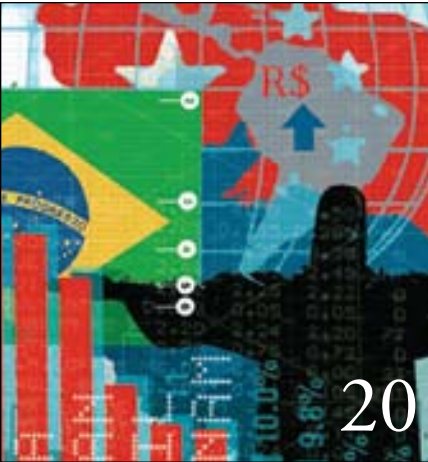
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TRIBAL REALISM

Roger Sandall

Born into life—we bring
A bias with us here,
And, when here, each new thing
Affects us we come near;
To tunes we did not call
our being must keep chime.

—Matthew Arnold,
“Empedocles on Etna” (1852)

New political understandings are being launched each day, it seems. From one quarter comes what we might call Praetorian Realism, an acknowledgment of Samuel Huntington’s scenario for the military disciplining of civil chaos in modernizing lands.¹ From another comes Matrix Realism, emphasizing the army’s role in the institutional order of the Arab countries.² In this expansive intellectual climate, with its growing range of options, perhaps there’s room for one more entrant. Let’s call it Tribal Realism, the aim being to bring anthropological insights to bear on our political prospects abroad.

Tribal Realism might have a number of practical applications, but its immediate goal would be to vet Western political speeches to delete all references to “the people” of Libya, or Iraq or Afghanistan. It will then try to decompose this popular collective noun into its actual constituent parts. Admittedly, removing such a warmly democratic term as “the people” will leave a sizeable hole in the prevailing rhetoric,

exposing speechwriters for assorted presidents and prime ministers to a pressing need for workable replacements, but the benefits should outweigh the costs.

For one thing, it will expose the enemy, too. From his Bedouin tent, Colonel Muammar Qaddafi has said he would not dream of harming “his people”, let alone shooting and shelling them, and he undoubtedly means it. Correctly understood, however, Qaddafi’s people are, first, his family, consisting of his wives and children; next, his clan; then, his tribe; and finally,

by a no doubt deplorable process of geographical attenuation, those tiny insignificant figures in the direction of Benghazi, who hardly count at all. Once we grasp this meaning of the term “people”, we will see that Qaddafi

is telling the truth. In the colonel’s ethical universe those who deserve his exclusive concern are the men and women he regards as kin. In contrast, that unruly rabble to the east may legitimately be hunted down and mercilessly killed. That is what desert chieftains have historically done when they could. That is what men like Qaddafi see as their duty to do, and that is what his numerous dependents—“his people”—expect him to do.

**The Tribal Imagination:
Civilization and the Savage Mind**

by Robin Fox

Harvard University Press, 2011, 432 pp., \$29.95

¹Francis Fukuyama, “Political Order in Egypt”, *The American Interest* (May/June 2011).

²Robert Springborg & Clement M. Henry, “Army Guys”, *The American Interest* (May/June 2011).

We might reserve the role of resident Tribal Realist and vetter of speeches for Robin Fox, University Professor of Social Theory at Rutgers and a man who has made the study of kinship, clans and the mental world of tribalism a lifetime speciality. His newest book, *The Tribal Imagination: Civilization and the Savage Mind*, is an exciting synthesis of earlier work like the anthropological classic *Kinship and Marriage* (1967) and his latest wide-ranging thoughts. In a way reminiscent of the breadth of Charles Hill's recent masterpiece *Grand Strategies: Literature, Statecraft, and World Order*, Fox ranges from a discussion of the Ten Commandments to an analysis of the great warrior epics and Sophocles' *King*

Fox knows what Tierney and most other educated Americans apparently do not: that tribal communities are the default system of human social nature.

Oedipus, from incest taboos and the myth of Isis and Osiris to the ambiguous nature of "human rights", from the plot of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* to Karl Popper's thoughts on the desirability of "open" as against "closed" societies. But his most topical and provocative comments are found in a chapter entitled "The Kindness of Strangers: Tribalism and the Trials of Democracy."

Fox begins this chapter by describing *New York Times* columnist John Tierney's bafflement in September 2003 upon discovering that the lavish weddings regularly taking place in his Baghdad hotel were mostly marriages of first cousins who were the children of brothers. Questioned about this practice, the young people told Tierney, "Of course we marry a cousin. What would you have us do, marry a stranger? We cannot trust strangers."

That, as others might have told him about endogamous marriage, is what pairing up in low-trust cultures without functional central authorities often entails. After presenting a similar example from Mario Puzo's novel *The Godfather*, Fox writes of a scene in David

Lean's 1962 movie *Lawrence of Arabia*. A British agent tells the tribal chieftain Aouda that he should attack the Turks in Aqaba for the sake of "the Arabs." "Who are these Arabs?" he asks. After reciting the names of some of the tribes he knows, Aouda demands to be told exactly what tribe "the Arabs" consist of that he should risk his men's lives on their behalf. Bringing all this to bear on Iraq today, Fox comments, "[T]hus some of the sheiks in Anbar province will ally with the Americans against al-Qaeda and its allies if it suits them. But their and Aouda's sole concern is with their tribal advantage. This was Aouda's highest moral imperative."

Fox knows what Tierney and most other educated Americans apparently do not: that tribal communities are the default system of human social nature. Humanity evolved that way for millennia after exiting the hunter-gatherer band stage of social life. Many of the planet's diverse societies have since moved on toward becoming modern states, but not all of them have. And even for those that have, the shadowy emotional residues of the distant past remain; we never lose anything in evolution, but instead add new developments to older ones. That is Fox's central idea and the theme running through *The Tribal Imagination*.

It is also a truth, Fox believes, that we ignore at our peril as we go stumbling about in far-away strange places where tribes rule with an authority denied the more-or-less absent state. The pride and latent violence of groups of mutually suspicious kindred must be the starting point, Fox says, for anyone venturing into this political landscape. Such men and women are not the free individual citizens of a recognized territorial jurisdiction; nor are they people with clearly defined and defensible legal rights with respect to the state, whether in Libya or Iraq or Afghanistan.

This truth, he says, sheds a harsh light on instances when "our leaders make claims about human nature and the natural state of human society as justifications for political action, armed intervention included." These leaders,

more often than not, suggests Fox, simply refuse to understand the essentially tribal nature of the lands they hope to remake. They are reluctant to grasp that

there is no 'Iraqi People'. The phrase should be banned as misleading and purely rhetorical. . . . What is not understood is that Iraq, like the other countries of the region, still stands at a level of social evolution where the family, clan, tribe and sect command major allegiance. The idea of the individual autonomous voter, necessary and commonplace in our own systems, is relatively foreign.

Numerous unforeseen events during the Iraq occupation have illustrated the priority of tribal authority. When men came out and stole copper wire connecting hospitals to the electricity grid, indignant U.S. soldiers tried to make the thieves see that their actions would hurt "the Iraqi people." True to form, the thieves responded just as Aouda had a hundred years before: Who were these "Iraqi people", they wanted to know, whose claims outranked those of their own needy relatives? The thieving clansmen felt no responsibility for some mythical collectivity called "the people" that, as far as they knew, did not include them and that, in any case, foreigners had invented without their approval. In contrast, they were absolutely bound by customary law to help their kin: those cousins who were also, in certain cases, their own spouses.

To realistically understand the world of kinship obligations and tribal authority, Fox argues, one must first understand both history and social evolution. The domestication of *Homo sapiens* and his living arrangements has been a very drawn-out affair and requires a better grasp of tribal life than whatever the parents of a Baghdad bride or bridegroom might say to a visiting journalist: namely, that strangers are not to be trusted, and that parallel-cousin marriage is considered the only safe way of obtaining a virgin bride. While these passing remarks do tell us something, a deeper understanding of parallel-cousin marriage must be historical. Fox writes that in the Middle East this institution probably originated in the desert-nomad stage of Semitic society when the patrilineal and

patrilocal (descent through males, residence with the father) bands of Arab Bedouin wandered isolated in the desert, and when all other bands were potential enemies. They married within their own band, their own clan, their own tribe. Even among the settled Bedouin this was maintained because it kept wealth and property inside the lineage. Outside were the unmarriageable strangers. This social arrangement represented a form of tribalism, moreover, that protected the individual "from the worst ravages of both neighbors and strangers. This includes the ravages of the predatory state organization that exists only for its own benefit and thrives on the plundering of its subjects."

Social Evolutionist

Passionate, restless, curious and intellectually driven, Robin Fox was born in West Yorkshire in 1934. His soldier father was decorated for service in India on the North-West Frontier, and the strong "Empire, King, and Country" sentiments of his parents helped make him some sort of a conservative from an early age. It may also have stimulated an interest in kinship—along with parallel cousins and marriage rules—well before he settled into anthropology as a professional vocation. When contrasting social theories about incest taboos came up in conversation, most people he met at the time favored Freud over Westermarck, the late 19th-century Swedish-speaking Finn and pioneer of social evolutionary thought. Fox adopted Westermarck's theory because it was more commonsensical (a natural aversion underlined by a cultural rule) and because it put him squarely in opposition to the majority. Checking out the full range of theoretical solutions that had been suggested for the subject, he says it took him "only a few Popperian minutes to dump the lot." It seemed self-evident even then that Westermarck was right, not Freud.³

Being a member of a spirited minority seems to have appealed to Fox, perhaps because he had excellent models for such a role.

³Fox, *Participant Observer* (Transaction, 2004), p. 147.

At the London School of Economics he joined the students' Conservative Society at a time when Hayek was there, and Karl Popper and Michael Oakeshott as well. In the 1950s, the LSE ethos still remained, after Harold Laski, one of "determined, earnest, Fabian socialism." As a student, Fox hugely enjoyed being against all that.

That was not all he was against. The year 1956 brought political distractions. He briefly found himself allied with the Left on Suez, chanting "No war in Egypt! Eden must go!" at a demonstration and tangling with police. Soon after, fugitives from Hungary's abortive uprising arrived, among them a student from some grey Institute for Marxism-Leninism, and Fox helped relocate him in England. The young man explained that his previous study had been "Proletarian Philosophy." Asked what he wanted to do now he was in England he replied, "Go to Oxford University." Asked next what he wanted to study at Oxford he said, "Bourgeois Philosophy." No worries, thought Fox, he'd be fine...

"God bless the USA! So large, so friendly, and so rich!" So said the famous English poet W.H. Auden en route to California. Robin Fox felt much the same way alighting in his own academic Promised Land. An ethnographic foray into New Mexico got him thinking about matrilineal marriage (in which a man moved in to live with his wife's family instead of the more prevalent opposite pattern), and he was pleased to meet members of an actual totemic "Fox clan" in Cochiti. But math was a bit of a worry, and when he attended a seminar on the componential analysis of Zuni kin terms and was asked by the Chairman of Harvard's Department of Social Relations, Clyde Kluckhohn, if he would like to comment, he said: "No. I didn't understand a word of it."

There was a silence, a collective gasp, then a spontaneous burst of laughter and a round of applause. No-one in the thirty-year history of the lecture series had ever made such an admission. . . . You never said you didn't understand: this was status death.⁴

Even harder to understand than componential analysis was American anthropology's

infatuation with ethnic "culture." In America, culture was king. There were presumably at least some Americans who understood Darwin's remark, "Origin of man now proved . . . he who understands baboon would do more towards metaphysics than Locke", but they were thin on the ground at Harvard. There, understanding human behavior meant understanding the kaleidoscopic diversity of cultural rules. Whole courses (whole degrees, even entire careers) could be built around minutely interpreting exotic details of ritual, conduct and belief. But, as for taking seriously a systematic comparison of the social behavior man shares with his fellow primates, or the universals men share among their many cultural expressions, forget it.

Of course the *anatomical* evolution of all those apes was recognized and accepted: The shared skeletal elements were inescapable. But Fox noted that human *social behavior* was somehow exempted from this rubric. Anthropological "culture" was in the United States a sanctified, autonomous and purely human invention. Out of the air (not the genes) a numinous cloud of symbols and meanings and shapes had somehow appeared, to be closely scrutinized according to this or that intellectual scheme. In contrast, Fox saw human society as biosocial, and human social behavior as indissolubly linked to the social behavior of our primate kin. Back in England for a while he got to know Desmond Morris (author of *The Naked Ape* and "a chubby, balding, ebullient, bright man—a kind of animated Humpty Dumpty"), who was curator of mammals at the London Zoo. Morris encouraged Fox to take on the whole topic of inbreeding/incest and its controls, both among mammals generally and in human society.

Then Fox met Tiger. Intellectually it was a marriage made in anthropological heaven. Lionel Tiger said that "male bonding" was a behavioral inheritance from the days when our early ancestors made the evolutionary transition to hunting. You had to have this bond to successfully hunt and fight; it was part of "the biological substrate of human behavior." From the day of their meeting the two

⁴Fox, *Participant Observer*, p. 194.

anthropological soulmates hunted together, drank together and sometimes wrote together. Their arrival at Rutgers after Fox relaunched its anthropology department in 1967 planted fresh and challenging ideas in American academic soil, some of them for the first time. In 1970, *The Imperial Animal*, by Lionel Tiger and Robin Fox, became an intriguing title in university catalogues.

Lévi-Strauss and Gellner

The Tribal Imagination is dedicated “to the memory of Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009) and Ernest Gellner (1925–1995). The Gellner dedication is to a man whose ideas about social and political evolution are broadly congruous with Fox’s own. The Lévi-Strauss dedication is more complicated, since the French sage’s *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* is dogmatically opposed to Fox’s evolutionary account, and indeed to any kind of historical explanation at all. On page 84 of that book, Lévi-Strauss forthrightly asserts, “We have been careful to eliminate all historical speculation, all research into origins, and all attempts to reconstruct a hypothetical order in which institutions succeeded one another.” Westermarck’s “familiarity” explanation for human incest avoidance was anathema to Lévi-Strauss: Agreeing with Freud, he was convinced that we are all sexually attracted to close kin.

Lévi-Strauss went even further: He believed that Culture is to Nature as Rules are to Chaos. According to Lévi-Strauss, the rules prohibiting incestuous relations were not only an “intrusion into nature”: By saying “no” to nature when in his view we really want to say “yes”, the rules became foundational. They established the Nature/Culture distinction as not only basic but sacred.

But is animal behavior chaotic? Are there no regularities to be found among other primates that both anticipate and parallel our cultural rules, including the incest taboo? Fox thought there were, and his 1983 book *The Red Lamp of Incest* became an authoritative study on the point. He had by then already argued for some time that Lévi-Strauss

confused rules with order. It was, he said, a re-run of an older muddle: “If you’re going to make that kind of mistake you are back to the old ‘law of nature’ and ‘law as edict’ confusion again.”⁵

Chimps did not have rules, but they did have order: the regularities observed by primatologists. From a comprehensive 2008 study by Bernard Chapais (*Primeval Kinship*, described by Fox in *The Tribal Imagination* as “a brilliant recent account of incest avoidance, in-laws, and social origins”), it is clear that whatever Lévi-Strauss and his followers may have thought, Westermarck’s ideas finally won the day. In some anomalous or pathological circumstances (Egyptian royal marriage; enslavement in an Austrian cellar) incest can occur, but for most of humanity most of the time it doesn’t. Nor are legal edicts required. Sometimes discussed under the psychological rubric of “imprinting”, Westermarck’s theory suggested that close and prolonged childhood association led to spontaneous sexual aversion in adulthood. Fox agreed: “Familiarity did not only breed contempt, it did not breed at all.”⁶

On this matter Lévi-Strauss was perverse, but his surpassing brilliance wins him the honor of being a dedicatee in *The Tribal Imagination* all the same. It was his exposition of the way human kinship rules work to ensure that we marry out of the natal group that powerfully stimulated Fox’s own interpretation. The distinguished member of the Académie Française was wrong to think that there was no continuity between Nature and Culture. But he was right to emphasize an important difference between the behavioral routines of apes and men—a difference encapsulated by Fox in *The Tribal Imagination* as follows: While primates have kin, they do not have in-laws.

Unpacking this highly condensed formulation reveals a whole range of connected evolutionary phenomena: the dispersal of animal populations, the need for genetic variability and the origin of language, the last enabling

⁵Fox, *The Search for Society* (Rutgers University Press, 1989), p. 152.

⁶Fox, *The Tribal Imagination*, p. 130.

social structures to form in time and space among men and women who have never seen each other and in some cases never will. Other primates don't do this, and here Lévi-Strauss was right. The uniquely human cultural fact that arose *was* something new, and it formed "the enduring relationship between natal kin separated by marriage but linked by kinship, by descent from a common ancestor."

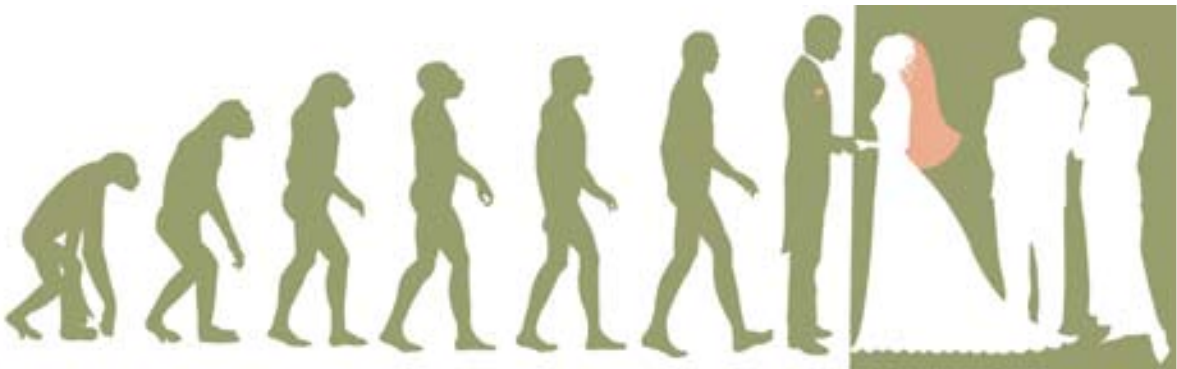
All mammals ensure genetic variability through population dispersal. Fox argues that this observation applies as far back as "the emergence of self-replicating matter, and the crucial revolution that produced sex to replace cloning." Sexual reproduction, plus dispersal, spontaneously produces the genetic variability natural selection needs to work on. If mammalian populations did not disperse, close inbreeding would result in a loss of such variability, and "hence mechanisms evolved to avoid it." At the same time too great a dispersal—so great that separated bands lost contact with each other—meant that beneficial features of kinship association might be lost. So it is that "organisms breed out to avoid losing variability, but not so far out that they dissipate genetic advantages." Not too close, but not too far; that was the evolutionary Golden Rule and, of course, the plinth of tribal society itself.

Which brings us back to what was going on in that Baghdad hotel. In human terms, the Darwinian imperatives of dispersal, variability and natural selection eventually produced a social world in which marriage with cousins was preferred. Historically, that's how it has been in most traditional preindustrial societies until quite recently. And for Fox it is an integral part of the tribal default system of humanity everywhere.

Civilized Men, Tribal Minds

The true originality of *The Tribal Imagination* lies in Fox's exploration of the historical and contemporary consequences of these facts. The stories mankind tells itself about its own origins in creation myths repeatedly and predictably echo a primeval conflict between the bonds uniting kin, on the one hand, and the evolutionary need to marry out on the other—to divide the primal unity, to socially separate, to genetically disperse. Often the original bonded creators were brother and sister, like Osiris and Isis. "For the Egyptians, as for the Greeks and Teutons, a series of sibling marriages characterized the early history of the gods." For ordinary mortals this was forbidden. But although brothers and sisters cannot marry (a near-universal human rule), their children in turn not only can but often should. And in the commonly prescribed marriage of a brother's daughter and sister's son (more common than the Arab union of brother's daughter and brother's son) the centrifugal tendency of parents marrying "out" is balanced by the centripetal tendency of children marrying "in."

This is the original atom of kinship from which a wide range of marital, procreative and residential patterns throughout the world derive. It is also a source of continually repeated tensions and conflicts that humanity dramatizes in its myths, legends and art—conflicts originating in the one between the illegitimate primordial pair of brother and sister and the legitimate outsiders (those strangers always regarded with suspicion) as marriage partners. Fox's analysis of literary narratives leads to conclusions



that are often surprising: What was the true sin of Oedipus? (Was it really incest?) What was the real conflict in Thebes involving Antigone? (Was it really individual versus state?) “How do the descendants of Adam through Seth foretell the problem of democracy in Iraq and question the Westermarck effect? Does the story of Lot and his daughters reflect a demographic problem in evolution?” These questions are answered in successive chapters entitled “Tribal Norms and Civilized Narratives”, “Ancient Themes in Modern Literature” and “Tribal Bonds in Warrior Epics.”

But it was in his powerful reinterpretation of Sophocles’ *Antigone* that Fox had earlier set out the problem we face today, when a large dose of Tribal Realism is sorely needed—namely, the clash of rival systems of authority and allegiance: of kinship versus the state. In his essay, “The Virgin and the Godfather: Kinship Law versus State Law in Greek Tragedy and After”, Fox radically alters our usual understanding of the play.⁷ He begins with a quotation about the clash of kinship and early proto-state authority from his own book *Kinship and Marriage* that is worth reproducing:

The war between kinship and authority is alive in legend. In story and fantasy kinship struggles against bureaucratic authority, whether of church or state. It undermines, it challenges, it disturbs. The Mafia constantly fascinates because ‘the family’ demands total loyalty and provides total security. When the state fails to protect, people look longingly at the certainty of kinship.⁸

Fox sees the European habit of viewing society as a loose aggregate of autonomous individuals as a barrier to understanding. It prevents us from seeing the truth of Ernest Gellner’s argument in *Muslim Society* that, under Islam, “the individual acts toward the state essentially through the mediation of his kin group.” It equally prevents us from

seeing that in ancient Greece (meaning the Greece of legend that long preceded the reforms of Cleisthenes and the rationalistic speculations of Plato and Aristotle), both autonomous individuals and the state itself were problematic.

To illustrate the point, Fox contrasts Sophocles’ dramatization of the issues with the issues themselves. In the play, the figures of Antigone and Creon individuate what are essentially collective matters. As Greek drama increasingly emphasized character and the merely histrionic theatrical roles of individuals became inflated. But this should not deceive us as to the political point and meaning of the enterprise overall. In *Antigone*, argues Fox, the leading roles of Antigone and Creon are synechdochic: They stand for issues much larger than themselves. In the case of Antigone it is the inescapable kinship obligation to bury her brother, the dead Polynices; in the case of Creon it is his demand as symbol of the state that the body instead be left exposed.

Those who see all this as a conflict between a passionate individual conscience and the state, says Fox, mistake style for substance. What is at stake for Antigone are divinely ordained sacred claims of kinship, eternally linking her ancestors to the born and the unborn for generations to come. What is at stake for Creon is more like an arbitrary municipal ordinance issued by a local chief whose *amour propre* seems to be running out of control. Creon almost hysterically invokes his “will” as if this alone were a self-sufficient certificate of legitimacy. But is he even a bona fide ruler? Or are his actions those of the leader of an embryonic and still unstable state formation where he may call himself a king, but is in truth merely a chieftain standing at the apex of a confederation of tribes?

If one didn’t know better, it all seems to evoke the code of *pashtunwali* standing against the pretensions of the Kabul Karzais. Maybe that’s why it all sounds so familiar. 🌐

⁷See Fox, *Reproduction and Succession* (Transaction, 1993).

⁸Fox, *Reproduction and Succession*, p. 141.

Roger Sandall is the author of *The Culture Cult* (2001), and writes on social and cultural issues at www.rogersandall.com.