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Tribalism is consuming the world

Dr. Aldemaro
Romero Jr.

Letters from Academia

McLuhan predicted in his 1962 book "The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man" in which he metaphorically saw a shrinking of the world into a village thanks to the tools of telecommunications. That is what he called a "global village."

Now the world is seeing a global movement in the opposite direction. The dream of an European Union is being shattered by Eurosceptic drives within many countries from Britain to central and eastern Europe. European countries are also seeing tribalism with nationalist movements trying to break apart their own countries. The more recent example is Catalonia, in Spain, whose independence movement is being led by an unlikely amalgamation of center-right, leftists, anti-capitalist and neo-anarchist tribes of their own, all united behind the idea that Catalonia should be its own tribe, separated from the tribe of Spain. They even fight among themselves on whether they should belong to the tribe of Europe or not.

Academia has been also the victim of its own tribalism. It was born as a trade group in Medieval Europe and endowed itself with its own tribal codes such as tenure. They have remained –for the most part– insensitive to societal changes, to fluctuations in demography, and shifts on how they are being seen by public opinion. They have also internalized

their own differences in the form of sub-tribes: disciplines, tenured or tenure-track vs. non-tenured track faculty, males vs. females, Ivy-league types vs. those who do not have that kind of pedigree, and we could go on and on.

Political differences and external money have also sown some of those differences, leading to intolerance toward ideas (even slightly different) by others, to bigotry, to violence. And that is why we need to examine what tribalism is all about.

Tribalism makes us irrational and that has consequences: intolerance, hatred, wars. It makes us shield bad guys by assuming that they need to be protected no matter what because they belong to our tribe, which can be summarized by the aphorism "He may be a jerk, but he is our jerk."

What is more concerning is that in higher education we are in a position of great responsibility. For those of us who have seriously meditated about how we influence the behavior of students. We know that they may not listen to what we say, but they are certainly watching us both in and outside the classroom.

If we continue to display tribal behavior, those students will consider that as "the new normal," that it is ok to adhere to only one way of thinking, that it is very comfortable to get the news only from the sources with which we already ideologically agree. That if we hear contrarian voices we should either ignore them or, even worse, shouting them down, as evidenced by many recent incidents on campuses. The idea of debating ideas in a civilized and well-informed fash-

ion, is over. Even when discussing matters, we tend to shout or just voice falsehoods, misleading statements, or twisted half-truths, knowing very well that what we are doing is wrong.

After all, why not? Our political leaders lie without remorse. Their supporters tolerate not only their lies but also their unethical behavior, and when confronted with the facts, those supporters come up with even more lies to justify the unjustifiable.

Unless more of us in academia thrive to become moral leaders by example, we will be failing in one of our most relevant obligations in our profession. Whether we like it or not we are examples for future generations. Tribalism and its allies are not the kind of legacies that we should leave after spending decades and decades in classroom, labs, studios, or field sites.

Students can learn the material facts of the subjects by reading the textbook, but it is up to us to provide moral guidance, not for indoctrination purposes but as lighthouses that deliver advice and help to avoid wreckages in life. Can we do it? It is entirely up to us, but it will be a tall order.

As I once heard the late Spanish Nobel Prize Winner Severo Ochoa say, "Men may have landed on the moon, but we keep the same morals of the primates from whom we descended." Think about it.

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There is a ghost wandering countries, societies, and even the halls of academia. It is the ghost of tribalism and that ghost is as old as the dawn of the human species.

One of the defining characteristics of people around the world, is to group ourselves for our own benefit. Since before any civilization could be described as such, we bound together to defend ourselves from other humans, for cooperating to seek food, to build our shelters, and many more things. That is why we fought wars, conquered territories, subjugated others, and developed characteristics that define ourselves based on physical appearance, behaviors, and beliefs. That is why we developed a well-defined language to communicate, dressed in certain ways, and unified behind a particular set of religious beliefs or political systems.

As more efficient means of transportation and communication allowed us to see what other tribes were doing, in some cases we tried to exchange resources or entered into conflicts with them for the same resources. Totalitarian states knew very well that if you wanted to be a larger and fiercer nation (a tribe of larger dimensions) you needed to unified the members of that group behind an ideology; by force if necessary. That is why the Soviet system, Nazism, all forms of fascism, and North Korea have done what they did or do.

With the advent of the concept of globalization epitomized by the development of Internet, many thought that tribalism was going to die. That was, at least, what the Canadian public intellectual Marshall