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Book Review: Is Modern Society Sick?

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Sebastian Junger’s new book *Tribe* asks the big existential question—what gives life meaning? For Junger, bestselling author of *A Perfect Storm* (1997) and award-winning documentary film-maker (*Restrepo*, 2010), a meaningful life is one deeply connected to a larger community. His argument draws from contexts as different as 17th-century America, remembered conversations from his pre-journalist years, and recent research from the social sciences and psychiatry. The book is at its best in the parts where Junger muses about the ills of modern society, drawing from his experiences as a war correspondent as well as from historical records and scholarly research. It is at its worst in those parts where he leans on a morass of loosely connected thoughts and hard-to-verify “facts” as evidence for his propositions.

Junker makes it clear to the reader early on what he means by “tribe.” He provides a moving anecdote about a stranger he met in Gillette, Wyoming, while hitchhiking across the Northwest after graduating from college in 1986. A day laborer who walked miles to find work every day, the stranger gave up his own lunch when Junger, wary of the stranger’s intentions, told him he had nothing to eat but cheese. The author uses this anecdote to set up his thoughts about tribal living and to contrast it with modern-day living. He suggests that tribe could be defined as “the people you feel compelled to share the last of your food with” (xvii).

In his first chapter, “The Men and the Dogs,” Junger contrasts tribal living with current Western society. His characterization of tribal societies draws primarily from Native American tribes whom he refers to in a homogenized fashion as “Indians.” According to Junger, tribal societies are communal and egalitarian, where individuals enjoy basic freedoms. Selfish behavior is not tolerated and people are extremely loyal to their community. In tribal society, he argues, there is more personal control, more free time to pursue pleasurable pursuits, less depression, and a greater focus on intrinsic values than in modern, Western society. Western societies, in contrast, are individualistic, materialistic, and racist. The capitalistic focus on productivity leads to a lack of leisure time, financial obligations, isolation and alienation, mental illness, extrinsic values, wealth disparity, and fraud. Selfish behavior is common and often even rewarded. Tribal society is preferable. In colonial days, Junger says, it was more common for white settlers to emigrate to the Natives than for the Natives to remain among white communities. He quotes from a 1753 Benjamin Franklin letter: “When an Indian child [who] has been brought up among us, taught our language and habituated to our customs … goes to see his relations…, there is no persuading him ever to return.” At the same, Franklin wrote, white captives once freed from their Indian captors, “Tho’ … treated with all imaginable tenderness to prevail with them to stay among the English … [they] become disgusted with our manner of life… and take the first good opportunity of escaping again into the woods” (3). Junger realizes that he could be accused of romanticizing Indian life and thus reminds the reader that Indian tribes waged war against their neighbors and that some occasionally engaged in barbaric torture. He does not say much more about this, but clearly this is one potential problem with his “take” on tribal societies—an oversimplification of a complex and diverse group of peoples.

Next, Junger makes the case that as civilizations have evolved from tribal to agricultural and then to industrial,
human experience changed substantially. We accumulated more personal property allowing us to make more individualistic choices about our lives and this diminished regular group efforts toward common goal, such as making meals. Since we don’t have to interact with people to survive, we find ourselves alone much of the time resulting in alienation, isolation and high rates of mental illness. Prosocial behavior inherent to communal living results in physiological rewards to individuals, such as an increase in the neurotransmitter dopamine. Junger states that poor people are less likely to be depressed than those with wealth because the poor have to share their temporarily. It also provides meaning—individuals have the opportunity to be part of something bigger than themselves. Junger stresses that when people are forced to work together they feel better even in really dire circumstances, such as the World War II bomb shelters in London and in the aftermath of natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina. In this section, Junger cherry picks the evidence to find the mental health benefits of societal collapse. Most occurrences of societal collapse involve extreme trauma such as fearing for one’s life or witnessing the death of people you love. These are not the ingredients for promoting good mental hygiene.

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time and resources more. Being more communal, more prosocial, makes poor people happier than wealthy people. Here, his claim is clearly not true. As published research (such as Diener, Diener and Diener’s work in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* [1995]) shows, people struggling to survive report less satisfaction with their lives than people who are not struggling to meet their basic needs. Junger is right to assert that prosocial behavior is associated with happiness, but clearly prosocial behavior can occur in all types of societies.

In “War Makes You an Animal,” Junger discusses what happens when societies fall apart. Societal collapse levels the playing field creating a more egalitarian or tribal society, at least real and they result from reentry into our alienating society. He admits that it may not be accurate to label this readjustment problem PTSD, and wonders if we need yet another psychiatric diagnosis. But another diagnosis might suggest that the problem lies within the individual, and Junger clearly believes the problem lies within our society.

In the final chapter, “Calling Home from Mars,” Junger attempts to drive home the idea that our society is seriously messed up. We think of ourselves before our community. Junger uses littering, mass shootings, segregated communities, the sequestering of our elderly, income disparity, the 2008 crash of financial markets, and divisive political rhetoric as examples of our selfishness and disaffiliation. Junger finishes the book with an attempt to find a way out of our current predicament and admits we can’t simply borrow from Native-American culture to remedy our dysfunction. So what can we do? He poses this question to Rachel Yehuda, a psychologist and PTSD researcher, who suggests that in order to make society work we have to stop focusing on our differences and focus on what connects us—our shared humanity. Junger adds to this sentiment by stating we all need to adopt a tribal ethos: “being willing to make a substantial sacrifice for your community—be that your neighborhood, your workplace, or your entire country” (131). I can’t argue with this advice.

In “Bitter Safety I Awake,” Junger wants to show how the characteristics of modern society contribute to the poor adjustment that often occurs when soldiers return to civilian life. Getting to this point is an unwieldy process, however, as he also attempts to educate the reader on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Here, the author is clearly in over his head. As an example, he undermines his own argument that veterans do not have higher suicide rates than civilians by stating that veterans have twice the rates of sexual abuse and the concomitant depression and anxiety may account for increased rates of military suicide. He does, however, provide some convincing data regarding the fraudulent reporting of PTSD, which brings Junger to the point he really wants to make: veterans are not faking their symptoms. Those symptoms are Teresa King is Associate Professor in the Department of Psychology and Director of the Honors Program.