Twitter Thread by David Roberts



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OK, the GOP has *formally stated* that it believes political violence in service of conservative political power is legitimate.

Can we stop "debating" this shit now?

I'm on hold with the WA Dept. of Revenue -- have been for an hour! -- so I might as well tweet a thread while I wait. Let's talk about two different ways of conceiving legitimacy. What is its source? From whence does legitimacy derive?

One way to see it: moral & social legitimacy derive from a set of principles that apply to to all tribes & factions alike. A tribe's actions are legitimate insofar as they accord with those principles. So, eg, "it's bad to torture," no matter who's doing the torturing.

Another way to see it: moral & social legitimacy inhere *in the tribe itself*. Some tribes are "good" -- chosen by God, genetically superior, derived from the right bloodline, whatever -- & some aren't. The legitimacy of an act derives from *who did it*.

So in this latter way of thinking, if a bad tribe tortures members of a good tribe, it's bad. But if a good tribe tortures members of a bad tribe, it's ok, ie, legitimate, *because the tribe is good*. Actions in pursuit of the interests of the good tribe are inherently good.

What I'm describing is basically the difference between tribalism & cosmopolitanism, or parochialism & universalism. Couple things to note. One is, under a universalist conception of legitimacy, tribes can, at least in theory, resolve disputes through reason.

If both tribes profess fealty to a set of principles that governs them both, they can work through whose actions do & don't accord w/ the principles. There's a "referee" of sorts. It's a baseline requirement for any nation or society that hopes to contain multiple tribes.

But if legitimacy derives from tribe itself, there is no way to peacefully settle disputes. Every tribe thinks it's good! Tribalist disputes can only be settled by force; there's no space for reason or persuasion to operate.

In our post-Enlightenment times, the latter conception -- a universalist conception of moral principle -- has become the default. People feel obliged to use that kind of language. But many people use that language while still having, in their hearts, a tribal conception.

This causes confusion. So let's return to the present case. A Dem might respond to the RNC statement: "if Dems massed & violently broke into the capitol, you'd say otherwise." In other words: you're being hypocritical, ie, not applying universal principles in a neutral way.

This kind of accusation of hypocrisy is *ubiquitous*. But its premise is that GOP leaders are selectively applying, or mis-applying, universalism. It's easy to think that b/c we're all so used to using universalist language. But that's not what they're doing!

What they're doing is applying an older (& in many ways more deeply rooted in the human social brain) tribalist conception of legitimacy. It's ok conservatives massed & broke into the capital *because they are conservatives*. Of course it's not ok for other tribes! No hypocrisy.

And indeed, if you look at it through the tribalist lens, pretty much all GOP "hypocrisy" vanishes. They are in fact incredibly consistent: the conservative tribe is good & deserves to get its way & be in charge; other tribes aren't & thus don't.

(Yes I'm still on hold. 1.5 hours now.) Another twist on this: people who are, by virtue of the size of their amygdala or their personality or their socialization (pick your explanation), inclined to think tribally are strongly inclined to believe that *everyone* does.

From that perspective, *nobody* really feels bound by universalist principles. No one will *really* sacrifice the immediate interests of their tribe out of fealty to abstract principle. The whole language of universalism is a kind of effete liberal game of pretend, a pretense.

The language of universalism is just how you're supposed to talk in elite circles -- it's "virtue signaling." In actual fact, in the privacy of their own thoughts, everyone is tribal, every tribe's just out for power, no one is cosmopolitan in practice. So tribalists believe.

This makes things difficult for people & tribes who DO see themselves as being bound by independent principles. The human temptation to tribalism is always there; to adhere to principle takes effort & a degree of self-sacrifice. But if your efforts to do so ...

... are ignored -- if the opposing tribe is literally, psychologically incapable of acknowledging them as such -- what is the point? Why sacrifice immediate tribal interest in the name of principle when it gains you nothing & is not reciprocated or acknowledged?

Versions of this dilemma pop up again & again. Take gerrymandering. GOP just lets it rip, goes for maximum tribal advantage every time. No pretense otherwise, no hesitation. Dems, again & again, are *conflicted* about it.

Their values push them to want to set up fair, neutral ways of redistricting -- & in many states, that's what they've done. But other Dems say, what are you getting out of that? You're losing possible advantage in the name of being fair but no one will ever acknowledge it!

You'll be tying one hand behind your back in a political fight, & for what? Your fairness won't be reciprocated. It won't be acknowledged (by GOP or media). Doing the "right thing" will, in a direct & measurable way, disadvantage you. Why do it?

So when one side goes completely tribalist, it creates an almost irresistible tidal pull for the other side to follow it. And at the end of that road, inevitably, in every case throughout history, lies violence. Might = right. Where else could it go?

This is part of why (to go back to a thread from a few days ago) I'm so obsessed with social trust. It's only social trust that allow multiple tribes to live together under neutral principles. All tribes must believe all other tribes to be bound by the same principles/rules.

If social trust is lost, if every tribe starts believing every other tribe is just out for itself, that none are *really* bound or restrained by principles/rules, then things start falling apart. That's where the US is. The right-wing is on the verge ...

... of abandoning even the pretense, the language, of universalism. To the extent they are confident in their power, they no longer see the need to pretend. Would they find any other violent mob "legitimate"? Of course not. We're beyond winking at this point.

Two final thoughts. One, I don't know how we come back from this, how we rebuild social trust in a country that never had a ton & now has basically none. I'd love to hear a story, even a speculative story, about how this process reverses itself peacefully. I don't see it.

Two, this has always been the essential US conflict. The country was founded on explicitly universalist principles -- it's the language of the Declaration & the Constitution -- but has always been, in practice, dominated by a particular tribe (white Christian men).

The great goal of progressives (articulated so well by Obama) has always been to push the country away from tribalism toward the universalism that's on the label. That push has always prompted backlash from the ruling tribe; over & over, they've rallied to fight it off.

I guess I used to think (like Obama!) that the push for the US to live by its principles was, however slow & frustrating, in some sense inevitable. The "arc of justice," etc. That thought -- that *faith* -- pretty much lies in rubble at this point.

It now really seems that the ruling tribe, the ones who view themselves as Real Americans, would rather rip the country apart than let it slip from their grasp. If they are losing power, then mob violence is a "legitimate" response. They just said so! Out loud!

I understand that this has always been the American fight & things have looked awful before & people who have had it a lot worse than me have kept hoping & fighting in the face of it, so I have no real right to be so gloomy. But ... tell that to the gloom.

Anyway. I've been on hold for 2:15 now. I'm pretty sure the WA Dept. of Revenue has no employees & just maintains this phone line as some kind of sick psychological experiment to see how long people will hold. Guess I'll give up & go walk the dogs.