Twitter Thread by PEG



PEG
@pegobry

Ok, time for a big thread on a general theory of history and society.

Every human society has to navigate the relative importance of the individual versus the group. You can think of every society as being placed somewhere on a spectrum between "Everything is about the individual" and "Everything is about the group."

Human society--tribal society--starts out at the extreme "group" end of the spectrum, because the overall imperative is survival. The individual needs to defer to the group because that's how the group survives. Natural selection means we're all descended from such a society.

Then over time society generates some surplus and there's more scope for the individual. And I do believe that the particular genius of the West is that it decided, earlier and more firmly than the rest, to shift the cursor further to the side of the individual.

First with the Greeks, then with Christianity, then with Modernity, we collectively pushed that cursor further away from the "group" end and towards the "individual" end. And lo and behold, each time we did, amazing things happened!

But humans remain social animals who evolved, as apes and then for 98% (this is a Very Scientific Number) of their history as humans, in conditions where everything was about the group. If you shift things too far towards the individual, the hoo-mons go crazy. Just go nuts.

But the problem is that, after 2500 years, we in the West have trained ourselves to believe that only good things happen when we push that cursor and that the answer to every problem is to push that cursor. For understandable reasons! But maybe there's a Laffer Curve there.

Here's how I would reconceptualize this: you often hear it said that the genius of the West is this focus on the individual. What I would say is that the genius of the West is figuring out *the right balance* between the individual and the group.

A good example of this is the institution of the nation-state. The nation-state takes our tribal instincts and sublimates them into allegiance towards this broader group which is *partially* tribally-defined but also partially based on abstract principles of law and morality.

And for 500 years, it has been the most successful form of political organization in history! So maybe there's something to learn from that.

And maybe, just maybe, if, instead of telling people "Sublimate your tribal instincts towards this thing which is bigger and more worthy than the tribe", we tell them "You shouldn't have any tribal instincts at all, and you should instead purely care about abstract principles...

... of justice" most people kinda...just...break inside, because most humans just aren't wired for that.

Maybe, just maybe, if instead of telling people "Your ancestors were very smart but not infallible, so once you understand their legacy really well you should be free...

... to question them constructively" we tell them "Your ancestors were irredeemable villains" we get a society run by ignorant, deranged morons. Maybe! Just a theory!

Anyway, I think this reconceptualization of the West as about the idea of *balance* (between the individual and the group, between tradition and modernity...) rather than one end of the spectrum is both truer to history and more productive when it comes to our predicament.