

Pavel Miškařík, Sebastian Junger

‘Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging’, Sebastian Junger, New York 2016 : [recenzja]

Studia Etnologiczne i Antropologiczne 17, 356-358

2017

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

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**Book review: Sebastian Junger:
Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging.
New York, Twelve, 2016, 168 pages**

Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging is a book written by Sebastian Junger, an author also famous for his bestselling book *The Perfect Storm* and for his two documentary movies *Restrepo* (2010) and *Korengal* (2014). Junger is also a war journalist, so it is not surprising that even in his latest book, he remains focused for the most part on events related to war. But this time, Junger attempts to investigate the reasons for the problematic reintegration of former US soldiers into the broader society and, through this specific lens, he questions the problems entrenched in the fabric of society.

Even though Junger himself highlights the fact that his book is not a scientific one, the whole structure and conclusions drawn from its contents are similar to most of social anthropologic works. It could be attributed to the fact that Junger has a degree in social anthropology from Wesleyan University.

Junger tries to demonstrate that some problems of the modern society, such as higher suicide rates, depression, anxiety, chronic loneliness, as well as some crimes, are caused by the dismantling of a sense of community caused by individualization and consumerism. He points out that material welfare is not a path to happiness, but rather that emotional bonds with other people are. The sense of love and being loved are essential for happiness and, by extension, for mental wellbeing.

But the way in which the author comes to those conclusions is in many aspects rather questionable. For instance, he points to the stories of the Americans who joined Native American communities to seek more “natural” communal life, while Native Americans almost never ran away to join the white society. In this

case Junger's mistake rests on oversimplifying the various reasons which may lead to such behaviour, and since cases of Native Americans who voluntarily joined the white society can be found as well, the statistical value of that fragmentary information in general puts the premise into question.

He also attempts to demonstrate that the occasional catastrophic events in modern-day societies lead to the elimination of social classification, which results in a return to a more natural tribal order based on equality, and the situation inspires in people virtues such as courage, loyalty and self-sacrifice. To exemplify his claims, the author uses the Blitz—the bombarding of London by Germans during World War II—or the events of 9/11, and more. According to his evidence, crime rates during those catastrophic events decline, similarly to suicide rates.

Former US soldiers suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are, in Junger's opinion, more adversely affected by the problematic re-entry into society than by the actual combat experience. The modern society, torn apart by social division and focused on the individualistic experience, stands in contradiction to the world of strong comradeship which soldiers experience in the army. The American society is in many ways driven by contempt or even apparent hatred toward one another. As a result, the veterans feel like they are fighting for a country which is, as a matter of fact, at war with itself. Consequently, Junger claims that this is probably the reason why, even though only 10% of soldiers deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan have combat experience, roughly 50% of them apply for permanent PTSD diagnosis. Making victims out of veterans has an even more detrimental influence on their mental health. In his opinion, it would be much more beneficial if the general society started to accept them and offer them jobs, so that they could fully contribute to society, as they used to during their deployment. He points out several different examples of how various societies deal with this problem. In some countries, like for instance Israel, the burden of service is shared by more people, so the society better understands the problems faced by the combatants. Conversely, several Native American tribes have created rituals or healing ceremonies which helped warriors with the transition into the civil society.

Junger points out that modern societies have almost completely eliminated trauma, and it is only through disasters or war that people are able to experience feelings of their own importance by contributing to the common good of others. Additionally, they are able to make sacrifices, which help them with the transition into real adulthood. He considers that those experiences have been essential to us for thousands of years, owing to our evolutionary past, and the lack of those experiences can be traced as the chief reason for the problems of the modern society, as well as several mental health issues. However, our sense of belonging or contribution to the common wealth is, in my opinion, possible to achieve even in the contemporary society through a vast variety of means,

not only through war or disaster, but, for instance, by contributing one's efforts as a volunteer or by showing kindness to people in need, etc. On the other hand, Jungers's desired ideal of a society, with such strong bonds of solidarity, may endanger people's privacy, while members of the society may feel that their individuality is being oppressed, which may constitute a threat to people's mental health as well. In my point of view, individuality and a sense of belonging, even though they seem contradictory, are equally important for individuals and the whole society. Jungers appears to be ignoring the need for individuality found in each person, because he considers American society to be solely individualistic. Because of that, this book seems to be glorifying our tribal societies and turns a blind eye to the disadvantages of such an existence.

Even though there are some shortcomings, the book contains many useful facts, the author's style is fascinating, and some of the conclusions are obviously based on true findings, but it would be better if the research assumptions and findings were subjected to further research.

Some may find this book inspirational, others provocative, some unreliable, others legitimate. And it actually does not really matter how accurate the information in this book is, because its strongest suit is the fact that it has aroused the interest of the general public in the matters of social anthropology, as well as raised a lot of important questions about our own behaviour and about society as a whole.

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