Over-tribalism in Elysium

by Kaiyu Zheng

Thesis

Over-tribalism, namely, excessive tribalism with which people form strong loyalty to their group as well as negative feelings towards outsiders, may lead to social polarization that results in conflict among social classes and groups (tribes), and worst of all, a collapse of the social order. To minimize this conflict, we need to be conscious about our tribe and others' tribes, understand other people's needs, be willing to give to others, and move forward to cross-tribalism.

The film Elysium, setting the time in mid-22th century. depicts this conflict between two classes of people: the people on Earth, an overpopulated planet with rampant poor and disease, versus the people on Elysium, a man-built extraterrestrial utopian habitat that has an all-cure machine (Med-Bay) and a prevailing luxurious life-style.

Critical Discussion

In the film Elysium, we can see extreme tribalism being displayed, and it is bidirectional. On one hand, there is the tribalism of Elysium, against people on Earth. People with illness in Los Angeles strove to get tickets for spacecrafts built by Spider's group, desperate for curing themselves with Med-Bay. Knowing the approaching of these spacecrafts to the Elysium, the Defense Secretary Delacourt ordered on-earth agent Kruger to shoot down those vehicles, regardless of casualties. On the other hand, groups of power on Earth also wanted to take over the Elysium and believed that they should all deserve the life-style up there. The Spider's group had this ambition, and took advantage of the fact that Max was on the verge of death if not being able to get the treatment.

How can tribalism result in the conflict so severe that eventually lead to the destruction of the Elysium's power? In the first place, in the film each tribe is utilitarian by nature; it tried its best to

maximize its own interest, ignoring others' needs or even feelings: Elysium imposes a dehumanizing robot system onto the lives of people on Earth, essentially for self-defense. On the other side of the table, Spider desired the overtake of Elysium for the luxurious life-style regardless of the harm that it takes to Elysium. This type of single-sided view about themselves and the other party engendered social polarization, and destined the burst of conflict. The arrival of conflict starts with oppression from the stronger, dominant party towards the weaker through the robot system. This oppression fostered the growth of rebel groups like Spider's, as well as the betray of Kruger, who was upset about being used and deceived by Delacourt. Kruger and Spider played an essential role in clearing out the Elysium's political power.

The uncomfortable contrast between the ultra-advanced technology development and the recession of humanity is ironic. It alarms people today the importance of looking outside of one's tribe, or the notion of cross-tribalism. Cross-tribalism requires us to not only be aware of who we belong to originally, but also understand other, different ideas. It also implies a different way of communication with (not limited to) other tribes, the so-called Non-violent Communication. Instead of communicating and acting merely out of one's interest, we should also care about others' needs with compassion, and be willing to give and satisfy their needs.

Conclusion

Social polarization, conflict, and social order destruction, an undesirable process as portrayed by the film Elysium, is the result of over-tribalism, even more severe than what Sherman Alexie called an "end game of tribalism". If we, all of the tribes, do not try to understand and help those that differ with compassion, then eventually smaller conflicts we see now may result in much larger ones, even wars, in the future. The effort towards a better humanity starts from everybody's self-consciousness, and willingness to understand others, from today, a world that is not yet crazily advanced. Let's all face it; the bad changes could get real very quickly, as warned by Elysium – in five days.