

THE PERFECT STORM

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What is most astonishing about the surge of reaction sweeping much of the developed and even developing world is that we are astonished by it. How could we not have foreseen that the vast “disruption” unleashed by globalization, digitalization, automation, artificial intelligence, and migration would sooner or later produce a reactionary response? A cascade of change is challenging the limits of human adaptability, destroying the old order—to the profit of some, but to the detriment of many—and propelling us toward a new order that is more hierarchical, unequal, rigid, and conformist (as described in my previous essay “The Shape of a Future Civilization”). This was bound to provoke widespread anguish and resistance. For although human beings enjoy novelty, they deeply fear change.

I

That people can be persuaded by factual or scientific arguments to change their minds is demonstrably false. Confirmation bias—we take in information that supports our existing beliefs and mostly ignore or reject the rest—is only one of the many tricks the human mind plays on itself. Hence we respond to new facts in less-than-rational and often sub-optimal ways. Indeed, adding the findings of neuroscience, behavioral economics, and the like to depth psychology reveals us to be barely rational beings, prisoners of subconscious brain circuitry driven largely

by primitive emotion. Per Thomas Kuhn, scientists are not fully rational even within their own domain, and outside of it they are just as deluded as the rest of us—in some cases more so, precisely because they believe so firmly in their own rationality. Nor are the so-called best and brightest exempt. Far from it, said historian Barbara Tuchman: “Inertia in the scales of history weighs more heavily than change,”¹ and statesmen often pursue disastrous policies because they are “woodenheaded” and prone to “folly.”² In the end, it could be said of most human beings that they have a large wooden block in their heads—an emotional-intellectual attachment to the reigning paradigm and the conventional wisdom—that can only be dislodged by main force.

Change can be unwelcome or challenging even when there is no particular reason to fear its consequences. But if it threatens stability, order, or an established way of life, then fear, anger, and hatred can become epidemic. Aversion to even trivial losses is another well demonstrated trait of the human mind; how much more so if one’s entire way of life is threatened. Many will abandon reason altogether, denying the undeniable, accepting lies as truth, ignoring blatant contradictions, and believing in impossibilities. (The current stupefaction of the mainstream media in the face of such irrationality would be a comedy if it were not a tragedy.)

To put it another way, the initial response to an existential threat to the established order will usually be what anthropologists call “revitalization”: a fanatical reaffirmation of tradition rather than a reasonable accommodation to the new reality. Thus the Paiute and other Western tribes tried to counter the threat to their existence with a Ghost Dance that they fervently believed would repulse the white invaders and allow them to resume their habitual way of life. The world is

¹ *A Distant Mirror*, Ballantine, 1987, 397

² *The March of Folly*, Ballantine, 1985

now experiencing something similar: those who have been disadvantaged by disruption are demanding the restoration of a vanishing status quo ante. The old order may not have been paradise, but it was at least comfortable and known. Like the original Ghost Dance, this irrational attempt to ward off unwelcome but inescapable change is doomed to failure.

II

An upsurge of irrationality is a mortal threat to democratic polity. Political truth is always biased to some extent, but there is a profound and crucial difference between limited rationality and complete irrationality, relative objectivity and pure fantasy, demonstrable facts and blatant lies. A sane information environment is a precondition for a workable democracy. Once reality has been hijacked, there can be no reasonable basis for either voting or legislating.

To this we must add an even more ominous development—namely, the destruction of civil society caused by an excess of democracy. A well-functioning civil society is the indispensable container for the human passions. As Freud said, repression is the precondition for civilization. If society does not both set limits on the passions and provide avenues for their sublimation, then we must expect the return of the repressed in the form of widespread irrationality accompanied by noxious political consequences, as has been repeatedly demonstrated by history.

In particular, the breakdown of civil society is responsible for a resurfacing of tribalism, the latent tendency to see the world in terms of us against them (and therefore as zero-sum). And also for an inclination toward autocracy, a readiness to believe that some political genius will arise to solve all the vexing problems created by the bungling “elite.” To speak in particular of the American polity, there have always been class, racial, and regional differences, but there was nevertheless a felt sense of belonging—of being in it together—that for the most part

transcended these differences. No longer. Urban and rural, more educated and barely educated, coastal and interior are now different countries with little in common and mostly contrary values. Lacking any sense of noblesse oblige, the cutting-edge coastal elite has gone its own way, confident that it is in the right—economically, socially, politically, morally—and if the “yokels” are not happy about it, so much the worse for them. It is only to be expected that the latter would one day react to being written out of the social contract and vote to overthrow the established order. As they have already had their way of life done in by the so-called elite, what do they have to lose?

The understanding that democracy in excess creates a chaos that invites tyranny goes back to Plato. In Book VIII of *The Republic*, Socrates describes what later came to be called the cycle of regimes. In essence, each type of political regime—for example, aristocracy, oligarchy, and democracy—is eventually undone by its flaws, creating the conditions for the next to arise, thrive for a time, and then be replaced in turn by a new one when its flaws come to dominate. Thus when the freedom and equality that are the virtues and hallmarks of democracy go too far, the polity is split into fractions. Individuals increasingly go their own way, pursuing their own selfish ends and their separate identities and destinies. Gender roles break down. Established forms of authority are disregarded or attacked. Traditional morals go by the board; the word *transgressive* is spoken in praise. Voting is more and more driven by instinct and prejudice, not reason and interest. Those in charge expend all their energy in infighting, not governing. In short, the polity becomes increasingly dysfunctional, decadent, and delusional. Plato’s portrait of democratic chaos—and of the would-be tyrant who offers salvation—seems ripped from today’s newspapers.

Similar concerns were expressed in *The Federalist Papers*. Madison and the other framers of the American Constitution justified its undemocratic checks and

balances as necessary to forestall the chaos that their reading of history showed followed inescapably in the wake of democracy. And although Alexis de Tocqueville acknowledged and even celebrated the virtues of American democracy, he also foresaw the emergence of authoritarianism once democracy's pernicious shadow side had undermined the foundation of those virtues. Indeed, all those who have thought seriously about democracy have generally agreed that it depends crucially on a certain set of conditions: a well functioning, stable civil society grounded on a shared history, language, and ethos, if not a common religion. Large, sprawling, diverse, polyglot societies are more demanding and complex to govern and have therefore traditionally been ruled as empires, with democracy confined to homogeneous local communities (if tolerated at all).³

This dynamic of democratic decline would operate without regard to the special economic conditions that created the modern version of democracy—that is, a substantial middle class enjoying unprecedented prosperity due to ecological abundance. The impending loss of that abundance will constitute the climactic disruption of our way of life. In short, democracy as we have known it is entering a perfect storm that threatens to obliterate politics as usual.

III

To the extent that it is possible to have a strategy for such a storm, it clearly cannot be rational persuasion or the reiteration of scientific facts. (Only about ten percent of the American population is truly “attentive” and therefore even available for persuasion by such means; the situation elsewhere is better, but not by enough to alter the case.) To speak more generally, the problems created by instrumental rationality will not be solved by it, but rather with a vision of a nobler future that

³ William H. McNeill, *Polyethnicity and National Unity in World History*, University of Toronto Press, 1986, and John Stuart Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government*, chap xvi

appeals to Pascal's reasons of the heart—in other words, by something tantamount to religious conversion.

Our strategy must therefore address our irrational nature, not our limited rationality. Instead of placing op-ed articles in *The New York Times* and *Le Monde* or the like, we will have to engage in something like cyber combat. Mostly leaving aside the established and respectable print media, which reach only the ten percent and have been more or less overtaken by events, we must wage information war in a digital media environment increasingly poisoned by fear, anger, and hatred, not to mention the disinformation and *kompromat* for which it is so perfectly suited. In effect, we need to become propagandists ourselves, but for a vision of a saner and more humane future. How to go for heart and gut without abandoning reason or stooping to lies and deception is the riddle we must solve. And we must solve it or let chance and duress dictate a future that no one wants.

