

Signs of the Times

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As anyone who has read my essays and commentaries over the past years already knows, I am a member — not a prominent or illustrious member, by any means, but a member in good standing, nonetheless — of a segment of the American population whose voices and opinions are not generally welcomed by the mainstream culture.

In part, this is because we don't participate in the gung-ho cheerleading about America and the future of this country and our effect on the world that has long been a meme of American mythology. Historically, Americans have been considered (and thought of themselves) as energetic optimists with a can-do attitude. The pervasive mythology in and about America has been that we are strong, capable, and good. As enshrined in The American Dream, ours has always been an idealistic, feel-good attitude about ourselves and what we can achieve. This mythology is one facet of American Exceptionalism, which is based on the fundamental belief that, as a nation and culture, America was chosen by God or Destiny to set things right in the world and to improve the quality of life on this planet.

The disparate group in which I hold membership believes that the evidence of history does not support such an ideal. We are critics of our society, each in our own particular ways, who perceive that the divide between idealized images of who we are and the reality of who we've been is much wider than presumed, and we see the gap growing larger with each passing decade. The drumbeat of our consistent criticism of America is not pleasing to a wide range of Americans who take varying degrees of comfort from the goodness of those ideals. As a result, some people have labeled us "America-haters." This is not true, of course. In many ways, we are more idealistic and even sometimes more patriotic in loving our country than typical rah-rah flag-wavers. But because we don't subscribe to the almost religious optimism about American goodness felt so strongly by previous generations and still embraced today by the majority of Americans, we are sometimes castigated as heretics.

In general, we are considered alarmists on the fringe. I wouldn't say that we're necessarily seen as the lunatic fringe — a club that seems to be growing in numbers among Americans — instead, we are tagged more often as people

whose perceptions and beliefs are far from the middle of the bell curve in our society. I'm not sure that such a designation is accurate; while we may be a minority, I think it likely that our numbers are considerably higher than assumed and include at a minimum tens of millions of Americans. It's just that most of the people who hold opinions in agreement with ours are less vocal about their perceptions. They get on with their lives not exactly in silence, but without rocking the boat by expressing their opinions loudly or in public. The one demographic that may be an exception are those Americans, especially on the political right, who share a particular and specific complaint. They are extremely dissatisfied with the federal government. More of these people are likely to actively participate in the political process.

I'm pretty sure that some of those who are offended by criticism of American society see the critics primarily as embittered and disaffected losers who have failed to capitalize on the fruits that America offers. They dismiss any critique as little more than sour grapes. Earlier in American history, the term "Luddite" was applied to anyone who felt that progress — specifically industrial or technological progress — was not necessarily positive in the evolution of civilization. More recently, with the many apocalyptic scenarios that precipitated out of the collective dream ether, which emerged from every conceivable direction — the end of the Mayan Calendar to Biblical prophecy to global warming/climate change to overpopulation to nuclear holocaust — a new designation has come into common parlance. Over the past two decades, the term that's gained the most traction in describing people who fear for our collective future is "Doomers." I don't like that term because of its fatalistic implications, but I do understand why it has come to be applied.

I wouldn't presume to speak for others, but my own assessment of who I am differs. I'm not a disaffected loser, nor a Luddite, nor a Doomer. I consider myself to be a well-informed realist who views civilization and humanity from the long-term perspective of history.

Those who share my views and concerns are often accused of being like Henny Penny (a.k.a., Chicken Little) from the well-known children's fable. We are seen by others more in the mainstream as shouting loudly that "the sky is falling." The problem with the use of that fable to dismiss us is that, unlike the story, the sky really is falling. A better parable to apply, in my opinion, would be Aesop's fable of The Ant and the Grasshopper. My compatriots and I represent the Ant. We believe that a harsh winter is coming, and that we must prepare to insure our collective survival and continued well-being. We see too much of modern America (and too many Americans) as The Grasshopper. Unlike the fable, the moral of the tale in this context is not that hard work is preferable to indolence. Americans are not lazy. America is among the most hard-working societies on earth. But too often the object of our work is short-sighted. American society has

become obsessed with and addicted to immediate gratification. We tend to live only for today, and both our lifestyles and our institutions operate now with a perverse disregard for the longer-term consequences of our actions. While many millions of Americans live as mature adults, our culture as a whole has adopted the approach of an embarrassingly immature adolescent male. Whatever increases profits in the short run is considered acceptable, and we celebrate those who use immaturity to their immediate advantage.

Whatever one's personal orientation, the undeniable fact is that we live in extraordinary times. From an astrological perspective, the entire decade of the 2010s represents the most significant and serious crossroads that humanity has faced for more than 500 years. The Uranus-Pluto alignment, which recurs usually three times per century at intervals of roughly either 30 or 50 years, is always provocative. The alignment of those two bodies during the 2010s, however, is both more powerful and challenging than is usually the case. I've written at length about this decade's perpendicular alignment of these two bodies, so I won't reiterate all that here. Let me state simply that — from a purely technical astrological standpoint — the Uranus-Pluto alignment of the 2010s is the most potent and critical activation of these two symbols in their shared cycle since a similar configuration occurred during the last decade of the 15th century — specifically from 1496-1500.

That transit corresponded to the watershed events that began the opening of the western hemisphere to European invasion, conquest, and colonization. The myth many of us learned in school that Columbus "discovered" the New World in 1492 has been thoroughly debunked by more recent revelations from the disciplines of history, anthropology, and archaeology. Many explorers from other parts of the world visited the Western Hemisphere long before Columbus set sail. We know also that the continents of North and South America were inhabited by a larger population of people than was previously presumed, most of whom lived in longstanding indigenous cultures. Estimates vary widely, but the current consensus among scholars for the western hemisphere's pre-Columbian population is somewhere in the neighborhood of 50 million.

Why, then, was the re-discovery of the western hemisphere by Columbus such a significant event? The answer is obvious, especially given the Uranus-Pluto symbolism of that decade. Previous visits from earlier explorers had been brief and only temporary. They returned to their homelands without leaving behind significant footprints, and without much, if any, effect on the indigenous native populations or cultures.

Columbus' "discovery," however, ignited a dramatic change. A golden doorway of opportunity opened that allowed the burgeoning empires of Europe to expand their territories, influence, and wealth. The result was that over the next 400

years, the western hemisphere was invaded and eventually taken over by emigration from these European empires, with the collateral effect of the near-total destruction of the indigenous population and their cultures. Much of this destruction occurred in the first century of European influence, due to the importation into the west of diseases against which native cultures had no resistance. The gruesome work of genocide continue by conquest, however, over the next 300 years.

Another outcome was the founding of America as a nation through the decision by formerly English subjects in the 13 American colonies to break with England and establish their independence and national union. That revolution grew out of new social philosophies that laid the foundation for the ideals of individual freedom and democracy and was, in a sense, their logical outcome. Those radical philosophies (Locke, Rousseau, etc.), developed earlier in the Uranus-Pluto cycle that began at the beginning of the 18th century, proved so powerful that they even spread back to Europe through the French Revolution that followed on the heels of America's establishment. Significantly, however, the American Revolution was the only conspicuous success. The period when the French Revolution careened into disaster corresponded precisely to the halfway point in the cycle, which was the final Uranus-Pluto transit of the 18th century.

Then, in the middle of the 19th century, a new Uranus-Pluto cycle kicked off with the publication of an even more radical social philosophy, The Communist Manifesto by Karl Marx, a political pamphlet that highlighted economic and social inequality through the historical concept of class struggle. This slim tract seemed destined for obscurity, but it found renewed popularity later in the rising labor movements of the late 19th century and set the stage for the Russian and Chinese revolutions of the 20th century.

All Uranus-Pluto cycles represent a challenge to the status quo of civilization by taking aim at the existing power structures. If the Uranus-Pluto cycle that began in late Leo at the beginning of the 18th century corresponded to the rise of individual dignity and personal freedom in society (democracy) and the next cycle that began late Aries in the mid-19th century corresponded to a similar challenge to the powers-that-be, but this time through emphasis on collectivity (socialism and communism), then a logical question arises: What new challenge to the status quo power structure is associated with the current Uranus-Pluto cycle that began in the 1960s?

I don't have a simple answer to that question. Spontaneous, grassroots social movements that challenge the status quo are characteristic of Uranus-Pluto decades, but the movements that have arisen in this decade are so diverse as to defy categorization. The many challenges to civilization's future that demand our attention are equally disparate.

The one unifying factor I see at work now — and I observe it most clearly in the political realm through the now full-blown campaign for the presidential election late this year — is that Americans as a whole seem broadly and deeply dissatisfied with the way things are in our country. Business-as-usual among the ruling elites is under fire, and the attack is heating up.

One might think that, in a different era, Bernie Sanders' call for a "political revolution" would guarantee rejection by centrist voters, but Bernie's candidacy has been spectacularly successful so far. Eight months ago, no one thought that any Democrat could even remotely challenge Hillary Clinton, but Sanders is giving her the fight of her life, forcing Hillary to change her strategy and up her game. Sanders may not win the nomination, but his candidacy has changed the entire tenor of the campaign.

On the Republican side, many pundits scoffed when Donald Trump entered the race. They aren't dismissing The Donald now. In fact, the Republican side of the race has descended into a nearly unbelievable mud-slinging combination food fight and barroom brawl as Trump's two principal remaining competitors, Rubio and Cruz, desperately try to smear Trump and derail his unexpected march to the nomination. Trump is so unpredictable in his complete lack of allegiance to any standard political philosophy that the Republican party is now in crisis, and their campaign has taken on the appearance of a no-holds-barred, Reality-TV cage match more than a political debate over issues.

As I wrote in my recent commentary series about the campaign, I doubt very much that any of these candidates could effectively save us from ourselves. One thing is certain, however. This presidential election is surely a Sign of the Times.

It's easy to take pot shots at whack-job politicians who refuse to acknowledge the reality of human-created climate change and insist that we need not worry about climate disruption. Equally specious is a looney-tunes Supreme Court that first grants George W. Bush the presidency, then decides in favor of Citizens United fat-cat political lobbying through SuperPacs, and even has the gall to pronounce with a straight face that racism is no longer a problem in America. We might as well change the name of the highest court in the land, supposedly the final arbiter in protecting the Constitution, from "Supreme Court" to "Kangaroo Court."

Justice Antonin Scalia's recent demise and the subsequent political fight that appears to be shaping up concerning his successor on the bench reveals plainly how much is at stake, as well as extent to which our future is up for grabs.

Yes, it's easy to go after the privileged elites in power who run our institutions, especially the most smug and self-satisfied among them, but I don't wish to minimize the importance of doing so. Institutional corruption, breakdown, and collapse are major factors in what ails us and puts our collective future at terrible risk. Still, just because our leaders are crazy and our institutions are whacked does not mean that we should take that as permission to trundle off to Bozo Land ourselves. We the People share a burden of responsibility here also, not only in who we elect to lead us, but in the ways we live as individuals.

While I see nothing to indicate that we are ready or able to solve the many problems that beset humanity, the first step in that process is to recognize that serious problems exist. What the past months have shown me is that this recognition is far more widespread than I presumed. I opened this commentary by stating that I was a member of a minority. I'm no longer sure that this is an accurate assessment. From where I sit today, early in 2016, it appears to me that a majority of Americans are well aware that something is wrong.

Whether that awareness and the deep dissatisfaction that accompanies it will lead us eventually to a saner course that improves life on this planet or simply rips us apart as we careen over the cliff remains to be seen. Currently, our collective discontent is all over the map. Not only are we dissatisfied with the existing status quo, we are divided among ourselves and in serious conflict about what is wrong and the changes we'd like to see implemented.

This splintering into entrenched factions is so extreme that it brings to mind two previous periods in American history. The first occurred in the mid-19th century as the debate over slavery came to a head and boiled over. The American Civil War was the tragic result, although even that bloodbath didn't truly resolve the issues surrounding race. The second period was during the tumult of the 1960s, when a diverse set of issues — civil rights, the counterculture, and the Vietnam War, among others — exploded into a culture-wide crisis in America. Both these periods happened as new Uranus-Pluto cycles began.

One outcome of the 1960s was the reactionary rise of a hard-right conservative movement in both social issues and politics. That movement grew immensely powerful over the ensuing decades from the 1970s on, fueled by organizations funded by the deep pockets of the billionaire class, by a significant and ongoing presence in the mainstream media, and by a religious resurgence in Christian fundamentalism.

Until very recently, these conservative elements found a home together under the umbrella of the Republican Party, however diverse their beliefs may have seemed. Now, however, the momentum of Donald Trump's candidacy in the presidential campaign threatens to rip the heart out of the Republican coalition.

This is yet another illustration of the assault on and possible breakdown of major American institutions, a long-term event that is echoed throughout global civilization.

These upwellings of divided beliefs — all of which are inherent fault lines in the tectonic plates of American mythology and ideals — have once again stirred up very muddied waters in American society. What strikes me as clear as a bell, however, is that we're living through times of extraordinarily intense pressures for change that are certain to call forth both the very best and very worst qualities of human nature. I continue to hope that we may eventually see more of the former than the latter.