

America's Pluto Return

by Bill Herbst

*Version 1.4 (posted on 7 December 2017)
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Jokes are the modern equivalent of parables. Below are two classic jokes. The first is an old Henny Youngman one-liner:

Moving his arm up and down, a patient says, "Doc, it hurts when I do this." The doctor replies, "Then don't do that!"

And another from Woody Allen:

A man goes to a psychiatrist and says, "Doc, my brother's crazy, he thinks he's a chicken." The doctor says, "Why don't you turn him in?" The guy says, "We would. But we need the eggs."

Rim shot.

Both of these jokes, as well as many others probably, describe (or at least reflect) the cockeyed collective situation in which we find ourselves these days.

Now, there's nothing new about civilization being nuts. Can we find any time in history where civilization wasn't insane? Temporary pockets of relative sanity might have existed in the past, but I don't know of any that would really pass muster. One of the questions associated with that search might be whether humanity is no more crazy than it ever was, or if we're getting crazier. My best guess would be that the craziness itself is fairly consistent, but the scale and repercussions of our collective insanity are considerably more serious at this point, in part because there are so many more of us than at any earlier time in history, and in part because the scale of human activity has grown so large that the consequences of our foolishness are profoundly amplified, to the point where our own continued survival is now in question, as well as the survival of a vast number of other life forms on this lovely garden planet.

As a species and a civilization, we seem unable to stop doing the things that are obviously harming us (and, even when the harm is less apparent, are setting up probable catastrophes not too far off). This is true even when we have abundant evidence of our need to stop certain activities and change the way we live. Also, all too often the presumed benefits of humanity's very questionable behaviors run counter to the most basic laws of reality, not to mention common sense.

I'm not suggesting that the benefits used to rationalize continuing our self-defeating activities are all fictional. Some are, some aren't. But most of the benefits are offered as justification not on the basis of their long-term wisdom, but rather because of their short-term efficacy — continuing to do the same crazy stuff we have been doing, and, in some cases, even increasing how much of it we do, serves only to prevent any uncomfortable shake-up in the status quo. [Think of the Keystone XL pipeline, for instance...] Heaven forbid that we should disrupt the way commerce operates. Apparently it's better that we drive headlong over the cliff than change course.

The word that has come into common usage over the past couple of decades to describe our predicament is *sustainability*. Some resources are, relatively speaking, infinite and can be renewed. Other resources are finite and will either run out or become so costly (or damaging) to use that we need to stop. While other values and variables also apply, one significant determination about which activities are OK and which are not is based on whether or not such activities can be sustained over time without causing harm to ourselves or the planet. For instance, renewable energy (solar, wind, etc.) is sustainable. Fossil fuel energy is not.

How we might create a world worth having includes a wide range of diverse subjects, of course, many of which are longstanding unsolved problems having to do with human nature. One subject that is a recurring and pressing topic is economics, and more specifically, the financial systems that underpin commerce. That's the only topic I want to focus on in this commentary (not that others are unimportant).

Here's the bad news in a nutshell: A financial meltdown of unprecedented proportions is coming in the years ahead in America (and the world), for which the great bulk of people, and particularly much of the American population, is unprepared or even unaware.

The neoliberal financialization of EVERYTHING that began in America during the 1980s has continued into this century. Apparently, the only value that matters in terms of economic policy is monetary profit, despite the fact that our money is more and more debased and disconnected from anything of real worth. The Masters of the Universe on Wall Street have come up with seemingly endless ways (one example of which is the financial instrument and investment product called "derivatives") to make more and larger profits for themselves. These schemes have nothing to do with actual productivity (i.e., real goods and services) and everything to do with making and hedging bets through investment. It's a little like the stock market, but way more complicated and bizarre, and the main players are those that possess the immense, concentrated wealth required to place bets.

Following the housing market crash in 2006, these draconian schemes for quick-and-easy financial gain through derivatives and other seriously questionable financial practices blew up in 2008 with the meltdown of big investment banks that — like addicted gamblers in a casino — had made too many bad bets. Over the previous decades, Wall Street had gone crazy in its headlong pursuit of ever larger profits, and the whole house of cards collapsed, almost overnight.

At that point, we had a chance to correct our course. We could have (and should have) let those big banks fail and go belly up. That would have been a painful, but healthy corrective. Instead, the central banks interceded to pump in billions of fake dollars into the system (through the debt creation of quantitative easing), and thus resuscitate most of the failing firms. The Federal Reserve has continued that policy ever since, and, granted a new lease on life, the revived banks on Wall Street have not merely resumed their former nefarious activities, but have amplified and accelerated them. The result is a stock market that's risen steadily in a complete disconnect from what is still a troubled economy, with the upshot that we're now living through the Mother of All Financial Bubbles.

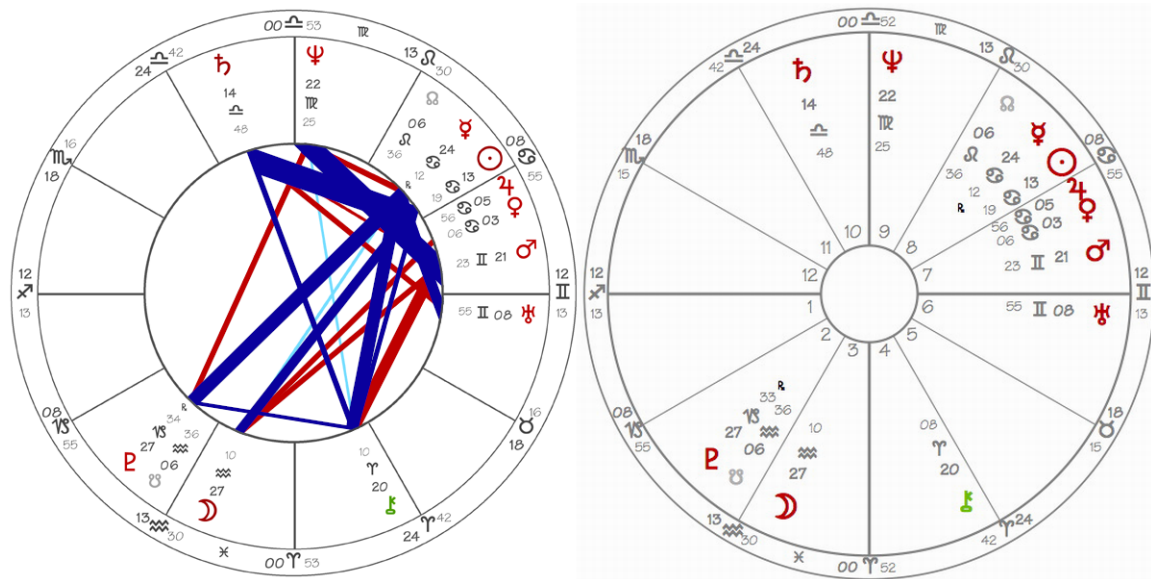
Although the economic high priests of the neoliberal religion (better known by its critics as "predatory capitalism") don't frequently discuss them, bubbles — with their inevitable, alternating booms and busts — are an essential facet of the dominant landscape in economics these days. Bubbles are asset classes whose value is artificially-inflated. The most famous example from history was the Dutch Tulip Mania that occurred in the 17th century. More recently, both the housing and stock markets have repeatedly gone through such cycles. What happens is a kind of ponzi scheme — the bubble grows into a frenzied boom, and then suddenly busts when the inflated value collapses seemingly overnight. Investors who bought in during the peak of the mania are ruined, but savvy firms rush in after the collapse to buy up the assets at bargain-basement, fire-sale prices. After the financial bloodbath and subsequent looting, the cycle starts all over again, like shampoo: *rinse and repeat*. Author Naomi Klein calls this phenomenon "Shock Doctrine," essentially the creation of catastrophe for profit.

The American economy, and, in many ways, the global economy as well, is now approaching extreme bubble status. Although the powers-that-be have done a truly amazing job of keeping the financial game going for almost a decade now, it's uncertain how much longer they can continue their prestidigitational sleight-of-hand. A relatively minor black swan event in any of numerous arenas — political, environmental, social, or economic — could turn out to be the pin that pops the economic bubble, kills the boom, and sets off the chain reaction that results in a major financial collapse. That might still be years away, or it could happen tomorrow.

Astrologically, the most serious economic/financial time frame for this country is from 2021-2023, when the USA's natal chart goes through its Pluto return. This means that Pluto will have made one complete circuit around the heavens since

the founding of the nation in 1776 and will return to its natal position. That's a fairly rare event, because Pluto takes about 250 years to go around the Sun once. The wars and political upheavals of the past two centuries have re-drawn the map of the world so completely that most nations are relatively young. Oddly enough, America is now one of the older countries in the world. Now we are fast approaching our first Pluto return, and that's a potentially watershed event in astrological symbolism.

Below are two graphics of the most commonly-used natal chart for the USA (called the "Sibly" chart, so named for the English astrologer who first published it). The chart on the left is my custom-tailored version that shows me what I want to see at a glance. The one on the right is a more traditional graphic representation. Both charts are exactly the same, however, erected for July 4th, 1776, at 5:10 p.m. local mean time in Philadelphia, using the Tropical Zodiac, Koch houses, and the True Node:



In an earlier draft of this Commentary, I wrote three pages about Pluto's symbolism in the USA natal chart, but all that ended up on the cutting room floor. Rather than offering an astrology lesson, I'd prefer to just cut right to the chase: Pluto explains a great deal about America's balls-to-the-wall pursuit of wealth and power, and a Day of Reckoning is coming (that could be more serious any of our earlier setbacks).

America is now roughly analogous to Pompeii and Herculaneum before the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 A.D. Our volcano is not a physical mountain, however, but a financial and economic system that is largely divorced from reality and is building toward an eruption (or, more accurately, an implosion). The Pluto transits squaring the USA Midheaven and opposing our natal Venus in 2008-2009 represented the opening salvos in this drama — the initial burps that

indicated serious pressures building inside the metaphorical magma dome. The Pluto return from 2021-2023 may very possibly correspond to the main event.

What makes this alignment (the USA Pluto return) so vexing for astrologers to accurately interpret is the uncertainty factor of watershed outer-planet configurations. Sometimes a particular symbolic event from the outer reaches of the solar system — most especially Pluto — corresponds to massively important changes in real life. Other times, such alignments come and go with little or no apparent impact at all. That's part of why the outer planets are considered symbolic wild-cards — like jokers in the deck. We simply cannot predict with certainty how significant a particular configuration may be.

Most astrologers I've read tend to regard the upcoming Pluto return in the USA chart as an important crossroads that is likely to correspond to major events in American economics/finance (Pluto in the 2nd house) and government (Pluto in Capricorn). I tend to concur, but we'll have to wait to see what really happens during the early years of the 2020s.

My concern about our economic and financial future is not based primarily on astrology. I've been concerned for a long time for a gaggle of other reasons, most of which are from what might be called "real life." Astrology simply supports my perceptions from these more pragmatic realms. Everything I know, however, points in the same general direction: We're in trouble, and we don't seem to have the collective will to effectively head off disasters that are of our own making.

This is not to suggest that no one is doing good work or making sincere efforts in finance or economics. Millions of people around the world — perhaps hundreds of millions — are working diligently to restore sanity to the ways we do business and use money. It's just that the overall culture of global economics and finance (and most especially in America) is skating on dangerously thin ice. Not only has modern civilization lost its connection to nature, our institutions and policies are disconnected from reality as well.

I don't pretend to know what any particular individual might or should do to prepare for the nasty eventuality of an economic meltdown or financial collapse. Hell, I don't know what I'll do, other than living as simply and frugally as I can and working to deepen my emotional connections with the people I love.

My response to most everything these days is to refrain as much as possible from making life worse. More love and compassion, less violence and suffering. That alone is challenging enough.