

Regaining Sanity in an Insane Society

How We are Driven Toward Extremist Thinking and How to Avoid It

By

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There are a couple uses of the word “insane.” One is in loose reference to something that is extreme. “The prices at that half-off sale are insane,” we might say, or “That roller coaster ride was insane.” We can also use it in loose reference to something we don’t believe or to someone we disagree with. “That’s insane,” we say, or “he must be insane.” The other, formal use, is in reference to “a state of mind,” as the Oxford dictionary says, “which prevents normal perception, behavior, or social interaction; seriously mentally ill.” So, I want to be clear that when I refer to our “insane” society, I’m not using the word in the vernacular. I really mean it: our society, like much of Western society today, has gone insane in the formal sense of the word, not because there are a lot of outlandish things being said that I happen to disagree with, but because as a society we have accepted a mindset that prohibits far too many of us from accepting the reality of normal perception and that greatly hampers our ability to meaningfully interact with others and with the world.

It was back in 1955, in his book, *The Sane Society*, that social psychologist Erich Fromm first raised the question, “Can a society be sick?” It could have been a revolutionary question if more people had paid attention. Imagine what might have followed if psychologists began focusing as much on our collective societal ills as they do on individuals, and if they had studied and identified the symptoms indicating that a particular society or group is mentally ill and needs treatment. Back then, Fromm noticed that three potential indicators—homicides, suicides, and alcoholism—were all higher in the U.S. than in the rest of the world. In these terms, he said, “We find that the countries in Europe which are among the most democratic, peaceful and prosperous ones, and the United States, the most prosperous country in the world, show the most severe symptoms of mental disturbance.”¹

Although he understood that “many psychiatrists and psychologists refuse to entertain the idea that a society as a whole may be lacking in sanity,” Fromm also pointed out that Sigmund Freud himself often used terms like “social neurosis,” and compared the “evolution of civilization” with “the development of an individual,” saying that “many systems of civilization—or epochs of it—possibly even the whole of humanity—have become ‘neurotic.’”² Freud even hoped that one day someone might “venture upon this *research into the pathology of civilized communities*.”³

Although I am not a psychologist, and, to date, there is not a Diagnostic Statistical Manual for diagnosing the mental illness of an entire society, I am serious when I say we are living in an insane society. I’m not basing this opinion on current rates of murder, suicide, or alcoholism, but on the basis that too many of us are unmoved by empirical facts and incapable of healthy social interactions. This insanity goes on unabated by those in its grip precisely because it is expressed and condoned within a societal context, which has the effect of making it seem perfectly sane. When an entire group or society is sick, Fromm says, it suffers from the “pathology of normalcy,”

rendering its members incapable of recognizing the madness of their unsound beliefs and destructive behaviors.

Fromm called this, “consensual validation,” meaning the members of such an insane group or society assume, “the fact that the majority of people share certain ideas and feelings proves the validity of these ideas and feelings.”⁴ These days, however, in our society, there is seldom one opinion held by most on any matter, so we compound our insanity by not engaging in meaningful relationship or discourse with those outside our mindset, which is why we segregate into groups that dislike and feel threatened by other groups. Otherwise, they might challenge, even tempt, us to question our assumptions. When such insanity is confronted from within the group, we rush to invalidate, isolate, and, ultimately, remove the challenger from our midst. If that fails, we ourselves split off to form our own group where our collective insanity cannot be challenged, while demonizing the evil others who betrayed our sacred beliefs and ran us off.

For example, I saw a video on YouTube this week in which a small group of anti-maskers intentionally raided a Trader Joe’s store in Santa Cruz, California, where masks are required. The group of about a dozen individuals cuts past those waiting in line outside for their turns to properly enter the store. Once inside, they are immediately asked by staff to put on masks or to leave, but they refuse. Before long some upset customers start shouting at them. Considering themselves “freedom advocates,” and repeatedly declaring their right to shop in the private store, they ignore the requests to wear masks or to leave, start grabbing items from the shelves, get in line to pay with cash, and when they are refused service, they drop the cash on the counter and walk out with the goods anyway.

The video on YouTube, placed there by this group, shows that they are delighted by the chaotic reaction to their antics and ends with images of a calm grocery store in Florida where nobody, not even the workers, are wearing masks. It was as if they were blaming the turmoil that they provoked on wearing masks by contrasting it with a no-mask grocery in a state with one of the highest number of coronavirus cases in the nation. This, to me, is the epitome of insanity, “a state of mind which prevents normal perception, behavior, or social interaction; seriously mentally ill.” Yet they were so certain of their own sanity and rightness that they intentionally recorded themselves for the purpose of showing the whole world the crazy responses of the shoppers and staff, believing everyone would cheer what they had done.

Equally as relevant as this, however, is the reason this video came across my attention on YouTube to begin with. I have no particular interest in watching the insane behaviors of people who refuse to wear masks. What I do watch, occasionally, are moderate progressives like John McWhorter and Jordan Peterson who are outspoken opponents of the illiberal mindset that is overtaking liberal institutions in our society, including that of our own religion, the Unitarian Universalist Association. The algorithms written to keep my attention predict that I must, therefore, prefer conservatism, and are now flooding my YouTube page with rightwing video suggestions.

I bring this up now because this is part of the consensual validation that is now making our society so insane. The echo chambers we find ourselves in nowadays are not merely of our own making, nor limited to the small groups we associate with in our spare time. We are surrounded by increasingly expanding isolated bubbles of misinformation confirming our biases because we are constantly tethered to devices designed to hold our attention. If it is possible for societies, communities, and groups to be insane, inasmuch as they are unable to accept reality and relate appropriately with others, then many have surely been insane in the past, as any honest review of history will prove. But today such insanity is arguably worse than ever because it can quickly become widespread through the use of social media, while also making it easier to use our devices to isolate ourselves from those with different thoughts.

“This is not necessarily a new problem,” author Clive Thompson writes in *Coders*. “In America, for example, the national conversation has struggled with people’s propensity to focus on fripperies and abject nonsense ever since the early years of the republic, when newspapers were filled with lurid, made-up scandals. But algorithmicized rankings have pushed this long-standing problem into metabolic overdrive.”⁵ Thompson goes on to point out a 2018 study by techno-sociologist Zeynep Tufekci found that “YouTube’s recommendations tend to over distill the preferences of users—pushing them toward the extreme edges of virtually any subject.”⁶ By way of example, Thompson writes, “After watching jogging videos, she found the recommendation algorithm suggested increasingly intense workouts, such as ultramarathons. Vegetarian videos led to ones on hard-core veganism.”⁷ You can watch Tufekci in a TED Talk explaining more about her findings and concerns.

Her research explains why, by simply watching a couple of moderate progressives speak against Wokism on the far Left, YouTube thinks I might also enjoy seeing a gang of reckless thugs raid a Trader Joe’s just to torment those wearing masks. I didn’t enjoy it and had I known its content in advance I wouldn’t have watched it, as I work to avoid such algorithmic direction. But even if I could avoid all such videos, or tweets, or Facebook ads, in favor only of those ideas I do agree with, these algorithms would still drive me toward extremism, albeit the extremism of the far Left.

In an outstanding essay in *Quillete* magazine last week, entitled “The Good Death—Cancel Culture and the Logic of Torture,” comparing the punitive behavior of today’s extreme Left to the public executions of preindustrial Europe, philosopher and historian Christophe Van Eecke writes that, “Reality and truth are decreed by ideology rather than established through the conventions of empirical research and a rational exchange of views.”⁸ This inability to recognize, let alone cope, with empirical reality, is, again, a symptom of genuine madness, as is the inability to engage in rational discourse. As Van Eecke says:

This is the human condition in a world of absolute relativity of facts and values (except its own, of course). It is a world in which nothing is certain (except the diktats of the mob), and where anything is possible (except the commonsensical and the empirically testable). It is a world in which lonely people (teachers, students, writers, and basically anyone who is terrified of the consequences of dissent or perceived “insensitivity”) are made to live in an alternative reality where there is no more

recourse to facts. It is a world governed by the only thing that remains when objective truth falls away: power.

Yet technology is but a tool and, as such, is but an extension of our humanity. What's happening on social media today, whether unsubstantiated conspiracy theories about election fraud on the extreme Right, the attribution of every evil to whiteness and whiteness to every evil on the far Left, or the unfounded fear of vaccinations from some at both extremes, are unintended consequences of using these new tools, as is smashing a thumb when trying to hammer a nail.

We know, for example, that Facebook's stated mission is to "connect the world." We also know the company was not pleased with the election of Donald Trump in 2016. Immediately afterward, an internal Facebook group stated, "The results of the 2016 election show that Facebook has failed in its mission."⁹ The disturbing issue of such a powerful company having a mission that involves electing a specific President aside, I'd say they missed the nail by a longshot, and hit a lot of thumbs in the process! In reality, Facebook did as much as any organization to get Trump elected by allowing known lies to be spread on its platforms. The radical right-wing conspiracy group QAnon, for example, went from being a fringe group to having millions of members because they were able to connect on the social media platform, just as some involved in the January 6th raid on the Capital were able to use the platform to organize their ill-fated demonstration. A 2020 article in *The Guardian* says, "New and established QAnon groups on Facebook are growing at a rapid pace and helping to spread the baseless and dangerous conspiracy theory to new countries around the world."¹⁰

If, as Einstein is supposed to have said, "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results," it would be truly insane if these social media giants continued or are allowed to continue enabling and fostering such madness. Fortunately, Facebook has been purging QAnon groups and misinformation from its platforms, Twitter began removing false claims against vaccines a year ago, and just this week YouTube announced that it is banning misinformation about vaccines.¹¹

These are positive steps in the right direction, but we're going to need to do a lot more to regain our collective sanity. In his previously mentioned article, Van Eecke has three good suggestions. "A first way of resisting the lethal cultural logic of torture would be to refuse it an audience," he says, "because the success of public cancellations depend upon an audience."¹¹ This means publicly expressing our disapproval of such occurrences, and for businesses, employers, and administrators to stand up against the mobs by refusing to fire those they have targeted. "Ignore calls to boycott stores exposed to shame," Van Eecke says, "continue to attend performances by artists who have been called out, read books considered toxic, socialize with colleagues who have been marked out as falling short of the latest moral standard."¹²

Secondly, he says, "Since the participation of the victim is crucial to a good execution, we must also, as individuals, resist shame if we become the target of a mob."¹³ This means not apologizing for our dissent, "*Do not follow the script*," he says. "Rejecting shame and guilt is central to defeating the

psychological torture practices of the cancellation mob ... Be defiant. Refuse to die the good death. Bullies tend to move on from victims who do not play by their rules.”¹⁴

And, thirdly, he says, “we must all publicly speak up against mobbing. The key to breaking the stranglehold of ideological conformity is to keep dissenting speech alive. Raise your voice, for public speech is the power that allows one to break the bonds of loneliness. It tells others, and the victims of cancellation specifically, that they are not alone. Do not allow your colleague or your student or your friend to be the only oppositional or dissenting voice in the room.”¹⁵

To these three responses, I would add what I consider to be the most important means of countering the current insanity in our society. Because I believe this madness, including the desire for power, is fundamentally rooted in paranoia—that is, in unsubstantiated and inflated fears—we must help our society find calm and peace of mind. To do so, our liberal religious tradition, rooted in humanistic theology and the ethics, is already well equipped to administer the right therapy.

For all the paranoia in our society is ultimately rooted in our fear of others, others who have different ideas about the world, leading to different ways of doing things. So, such fear always leads to controlling speech, the expression of ideas, in order to hold power over how things are done. To claim the right to such authority, we must first convince ourselves those holding the different, dangerous, harmful ideas are not only wrongheaded, but are also wrong-hearted. They must be demonized before we can justify publicly executing them, figuratively speaking these days.

So, our task, as Unitarians who believe in the fundamental goodness and potential for goodness in all human beings, is to foster trust of others throughout our society. When we encounter such fear, we must, like the angels, bring a message that begins, “Be not afraid.” There is much to worry about in our society and in the world these days, as is the case for every generation. Sure, some of our worries are unprecedented but this is not, as so many other religions teach, the fault of the innate and unpreventable evil within each human heart. These worries are caused, rather, by the unexpected consequences of our own creativity and beauty, and, together, the same curiosity and inventiveness that is innate within us, can lead to creative and beautiful solutions, but only if we come together as a human family, rather than letting algorithms and extremists accentuate our fears by driving us further apart.

I think this spirit is what’s indicated by most the videos YouTube suggests I watch. I am often moved to tears watching inspiring performances on talent shows from around the world, not so much by the performances, but by the large audiences eager to cheer and encourage and support the performers, especially the most timid and awkward performers who need it most. Thousands of people are ready to leap to their feet in ovations and to boo any judge who criticizes the performers. That’s the humanity I see, one in which most people want to support each other. That’s our innate nature, not sin and evil.

I also get a lot of prank videos brought to my attention, because I love to laugh at people responding to the wonders and surprises of life, and to see the joy and gratitude that follows their initial shock. A potted plant that reaches out to grab you as pass it on the street, a snowman who suddenly turns its face to look at you, or someone pretending to flatulate in front those with him on an escalator. How quickly we can recover our senses by helping each other laugh and by finding joy together.

I also get video suggestions showing ordinary people helping others in distress or need. One of my recent favorites is of a senior citizen trying to pay for his groceries with lots of change, but he keeps getting confused and is holding up the line. Most of those in line don't get angry or move to another line. When he apologizes, they respond, "I'm in no hurry. Take your time. I have all day." Eventually they offer to help him, and when it turns out he doesn't have enough, they give him the rest of what he needs, including one man who had just lost his job and is all but broke himself.

That's the humanity I see. That's the sane society I want to live in. Be not afraid.

¹ Fromm, Erich, *The Sane Society*, Henry Holt & Company, New York, NY, 1955, p. 7-11, p. 10.

² Ibid., p. 19.

³ Ibid., p. 20.

⁴ Ibid., p. 14.

⁵ Thompson, Clive. *Coders* (p. 317). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Van Eecke, Christophe, "The Good Death—Cancel Culture and the Logic of Torture," *Quillette*, Sept. 9, 2021

⁹ Harris, Blake J., *The History of the Future*, Harper Collins, New York, NY, 2019, p. 442.

¹⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/aug/11/qanon-facebook-groups-growing-conspiracy-theory>

¹¹ Van Eecke, *ibid.*

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.