

## DELUSIONS OF SANITY

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ACCORDING TO THE Parable of the Poisoned Well, there once lived a king who ruled over a great city. He was loved for his wisdom and feared for his power. At the heart of the city was a well, the waters of which were clean and pure and from where the king and all the inhabitants drank. But one evening an enemy entered the city and poisoned the well with a strange liquid. Henceforth, all who drank from it went mad.

All the people drank the water, but not the king, for he had been warned by a watchman who had observed the contamination. The people began to say, 'The king is mad and has lost his reason. Look how strangely he behaves. We cannot be ruled by a madman, so he must be dethroned.' The king sensed his subjects were preparing to rise against him and grew fearful of revolution. One evening he ordered a royal goblet to be filled from the well and drank from it deeply. The next day there was great rejoicing among the people, for their beloved king had finally regained his wisdom and sanity.

In his 1955 book *The Sane Society*, the great psychoanalyst Erich Fromm suggested that nothing is more common than the assumption that we, people living in the advanced industrial economies, are eminently sane. Australia's Department of Health reports that almost half of Australians aged sixteen to eighty-five years will experience mental illness at some point in their lives. Nevertheless, the fact that so many individuals will suffer from more or less severe forms of mental illness does not seem to shake our conviction with respect to the overall state of our mental health. According to Fromm, we are inclined to see incidents of mental illness as strictly individual and isolated disturbances, while acknowledging – with some discomfort, perhaps – that so many of these incidents should occur in a culture that is supposedly sane.

Fromm haunts our self-image even today, attempting to unsettle these assumptions of sanity: 'Can we be so sure that we are not deceiving ourselves? Many an inmate of an insane asylum is convinced that everybody else is crazy, except himself.' This line of inquiry is especially disconcerting in a world where, to use Fromm's somewhat antiquated language, inmates evidently have taken over the asylum and seem intent on running it into the ground. The existential threat of climate breakdown is only one of the ominous indicators of this reckless death drive, but it alone has the potential to lay waste to our species as well as most others. In an age now widely described as the Anthropocene, the conventionally held distinction between sanity and insanity is at risk of collapsing...and taking our civilisation with it.

The distinction, therefore, is ripe for deconstruction. At least since Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* (1961), it has been understood that the idea of (in)sanity is, in some respects at least, an evolving, socially constructed category. Not only does the medical validity of mental health diagnoses and treatments shift with the times, but what has been judged 'sane' in one era has the potential to blur into what is not in another – and without announcement. This can disguise the fact that social practices or patterns of thought that may once have been considered healthy may now be properly diagnosed as unhealthy. And while this can apply to individual cases, there is no reason to think it should not also apply more broadly to a society at large, which is to say that a society might go insane without being aware of its own degeneration.

Surely we would know if our society was insane? Not necessarily. One does not need to be a conspiracy theorist to recognise, with Foucault, that power shapes knowledge. If profits and economic growth are the benchmarks of success in a society, it simply may not be profitable to expose a society as insane, and even members of an insane society may sooner choose wilful blindness than look too deeply into the subconscious of their own culture. Thus an accurate diagnosis can be easily obscured or ignored if it does not accord with dominant interests. But merely *assuming* something or someone is sane does not make it so. We should always reserve the right to think for ourselves about these matters, to be brave enough to stare into the abyss – and be prepared for the abyss to stare back – no matter what we find.

At this moment, it feels important to delve into these critical provocations: is our society sane? If it is not – and I find myself pointing towards this thesis – another question follows: what might sanity look like in an insane world? After all, as the Indian guru Jiddu Krishnamurti is credited with saying: 'It is no measure of health to be well adjusted to a profoundly sick society.' This makes it all the harder to diagnose the state of a society's sanity, given that it is never clear whether it is the people who are sick or the society. We should at least leave open the possibility, as Johann Hari suggests in *Lost Connections* (2018), that some mental health conditions might be perfectly normal responses to a particular state of society, not resolvable simply with a rebalancing of chemicals in the brain through pharmaceuticals. Indeed, as Martin Luther King Jnr once said, there are some things in our world to which we should be proud to be maladjusted.

I come to these questions without mental health training or expertise, but simply as an ordinary member of late-stage capitalist society, one suffering in his own way and trying to understand the mental health burdens that accompany our ecocidal and grossly inequitable mode of civilisation. I make no comment on the very real biophysical causes for mental illness, such as chemical imbalances or physical injury. Instead, I reflect, at a 'macro' level, on the sanity or insanity of the dominant culture and political economy in contemporary capitalist societies such as Australia, asking how the world 'out there' can impact the inner dimension of our lives. Following Fromm's lead, I will inquire not so much into individual pathology, but into what he calls 'collective neuroses' or 'the pathology of normalcy'. Of course, collective neuroses are not easily observed, for they are, by nature, the background fabric of existence and so easily missed. Be warned, then: we might be like the fish that do not know they swim in water.

WHEN FIRST REFLECTING on the Parable of the Poisoned Well, I tried to distil from it a positive life lesson, but I quickly realised this was the wrong way to approach it. There is arguably no moral guidance in the fable, only an amoral social insight. If there is a lesson, it is that sometimes it is easier or safer simply to conform to common assumptions or practices, no matter how dubious or absurd they are, to avoid being socially ostracised. Indeed, if you do not go with the flow you may be deemed mad, so it may be better just to blend in and drink the Kool-Aid. A second reading of the parable points to the relativity of notions of sanity, suggesting that what's sane or insane isn't fixed, but is culturally dependent: a person is sane if they 'function' well enough in the society, even if that society is sick.

It is this relativity of sanity that Fromm calls into question in *The Sane Society*. 'The fact that millions of people share the same vices,' he wrote, 'does not make these vices virtues, the fact that they share so many errors does not make the errors to be truths, and the fact that millions of people share the same forms of mental pathology does not make these people sane.' He felt that society needed certain objective conditions to be sane, including environmental sustainability.

If too many of humankind's most basic needs were not being met despite unprecedented capacity, he felt it would be proper to declare a society sick, even if the behaviour producing the sickness was widespread and validated by its own internal cultural logic. This invites critical reflection on what is deemed 'normal' behaviour today, just in case we are participating in practices that, from an external or objective perspective, would be diagnosed as patently insane. After all, if our society were sick, we'd want to know, right?

Let us, in good psychiatric fashion, look at the facts. The climate emergency has already been mentioned, pointing to our fatal addiction to fossil fuels. We know their combustion is killing the planet, but we can't help ourselves. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change was established in 1988 to advise us on the science of climate change, yet here we are, more than thirty years later, and carbon emissions continue to rise (excepting only the years of financial crisis or pandemic). We emit no less than thirty-seven gigatons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere each year, in full knowledge of their impacts. Driven by a fetish for economic growth, we continue using fossil fuels to supply around 85 per cent of global primary energy demand, voting in politicians who bring lumps of coal into a parliament for a laugh and enthusiastically build new fossil fuel power stations. It is a tragedy disguised as a grim joke.

Scientists warn that current trajectories of climate heating are not compatible with civilisation as we know it, with potentially billions of lives at risk in coming decades, both human and non-human. You know something is wrong when the Arctic is burning. And yet nothing is more 'normal' than hopping into a fossil-fuelled car or consuming products that have been shipped around the world to satisfy the carboniferous desires of affluent society. I mention these features of industrial civilisation not to sit in judgement: we are, so to speak, in the soup together. But let us not divert our gaze just because it is embarrassing and uncomfortable to look in the mirror.

The same fossil fuels underpin our destructive systems of industrial agriculture. We're deforesting the planet and destroying topsoil to feed a population that is growing by over 200,000 people every day. The United Nations project that we'll have reached almost ten billion people by mid-century. This human dominance of the planet under global capitalism is contributing to a holocaust of biodiversity loss, with the World Wildlife Fund recently reporting that populations of vertebrate species have declined by 68 per cent since 1970. It is no exaggeration to say that we are living through the sixth mass extinction, driven by human economic activity that is not just normal but encouraged, rewarded and widely admired.

The flow of materials and resources through the global economy is now in excess of 100 billion tonnes per year, and that's expected to double in coming decades despite deluded hopes for 'green growth'. And how easily we blind ourselves to our incrementally destructive practices. We find it perfectly normal to purchase and discard single-use plastics that end up polluting our rivers and oceans for hundreds or thousands of years, directing our growing and increasingly toxic waste streams away from cities and into the natural environment to be dealt with by future generations or poorer communities. Human trash has been found in Antarctica, in the deepest parts of the ocean, and 'space junk' is now a concern for orbiting spacecraft and satellites. Nowhere and nothing is sacred. In 2017, more than 15,000 scientists signed the second 'Warning to Humanity' – the first was published in 1992 – advising that misery and catastrophe await if fundamental shifts in our civilisation are not urgently taken. And still, as if suffering a collective neurosis, Empire marches on like a snake eating its own tail, pursuing growth for growth's sake – the ideology of a cancer cell.

Added to this is the fact that humanity lives in the terrifying shadow of its own nuclear arsenals, representing a unique technological capacity for mutually assured destruction. Whether the furnace of climate change or a nuclear winter lies ahead, it is too early to say. Alternative pathways are getting harder to imagine. In the twentieth century, ordinary people marched off to war after war, resulting in the death of more than 100 million. One dares not imagine what the next global military clash might bring, as we nervously watch superpowers butt heads. Lucky for us the nuclear launch codes were put in the hands of 'very stable geniuses' like Donald Trump: what could go wrong? The election of Joe Biden reduces but does not eliminate this existential threat. The geopolitical arena remains a nuclear tinderbox of fiercely competing interests.

Of course, ecological and geopolitical tragedies cannot be isolated from the humanitarian crises of poverty and inequality. In 2017, Oxfam released a study concluding that the richest eight men now own more than the poorest half of humanity. Dwell on that for a moment if you have the courage. We can debate research methodologies or 'theories of justice', but the point is now undeniable: the distribution of wealth in our world is harrowingly unjust, with small islands of unfathomable plenty surrounded by vast oceans of humiliating poverty. There is nothing 'natural' about this concentration of wealth. It is a result of choices that we humans make about how to structure our economies. Things could be different, but we've been duped into thinking this is 'just the way the world is' and that the trickle-down effect will sort things out. The moral egregiousness of poverty is all the more disturbing given that the human capacity to eliminate hunger has never been greater. The global development agenda is failing, and it is a sign of idiocy to keep doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result.

This is not happy reading, I know, but I'm afraid things get even worse. A spiritual malaise seems to be spreading throughout advanced capitalist societies, as if the material rewards of consumerism have failed to fulfil their promise of a happy and meaningful existence. Scholars publish books about it: Robert E Lane's *The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies*, David G Myers' *The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty*, and Clive Hamilton and Richard Denniss' *Affluenza: When Too Much Is Never Enough*. For whom, then, do we destroy the planet? Is a greater abundance of 'nice things' what we are lacking in the overdeveloped world? Or is there, as historian and philosopher Lewis Mumford once opined, an inner dimension to our crises that must be resolved before the outer crises can be effectively met?

In the face of all this it is easy to feel chronically disenchanting with life, to feel disconnected from people, place and purpose. We humans of late capitalism have all felt, and perhaps still feel, this disconnection. How easy it is to live life regurgitating the prewritten script of advanced industrial society: cogs in a vast machine, easily replaced. Perhaps we see our disenchantment reflected in the eyes of those tired, alienated commuters, a class into which it is so easy to fall simply by virtue of being subjects of the capitalist order. We all know that there is more to life than *this*. We find ourselves living in an age where the old dogmas of growth, material affluence and technology are increasingly exposed as false idols. Like a fleet of ships that has been unmoored in a storm, our species is drifting in dangerous seas without a clear sense of direction.

Where are the new sources of meaning and guidance that all societies need to fight off the ennui? Pioneering sociologist Émile Durkheim used the term 'anomie' to refer to a condition in which a culture's traditional norms have broken down without new norms arising that can give sense to a changing world. Perhaps this is the term that best explains our existential condition today.

We are coming to realise that we have lost our way, as the factors that are supposed to represent 'progress' according to dominant cultural myths are increasingly experienced as breakdown.

One could go on, but it would be perverse to do so. 'Doom porn' is not my business or purpose. My point is simply to present a summary case for diagnosing our society as insane – not as rhetorical strategy, but in the pursuit of literal truth. If an individual knowingly destroyed the conditions of his or her own existence, we'd question their sanity. If a mother only fed her children if she could make a profit, we'd doubt the soundness of her mind. If a father took all the household wealth and left the rest of the family in destitution while building bombs in the basement that could destroy the neighbourhood, we'd call him psychopathic. And yet these are characteristics of our society as a whole. Fromm would not permit us to diagnose ourselves and our society as sane just because the actions that produce the features outlined above are considered 'normal'. There is a pathology to our normalcy – my own regrettably included – and this pathology is no less pathological just because it is shared by millions upon millions of people.

THE ISSUE AT the heart of this exploration concerns the mental health effects that might naturally and justifiably arise when otherwise sane people find themselves living in an insane world. The paradox that threatens to emerge has already been variously noted. In *Welcome to the Monkey House*, Kurt Vonnegut Jnr wrote, 'a sane person in an insane society must appear insane'. Thomas Stephen Szasz contended that 'Insanity is the only sane reaction to an insane society.' And the British psychiatrist RD Laing concluded that insanity was 'a perfectly rational adjustment to an insane world'. I think I recall Dr Spock saying something similar.

But perhaps Fromm's words offer the most incisive diagnosis for our time:

A person who has not been completely alienated, who has remained sensitive and able to feel, who has not lost the sense of dignity, who is not yet 'for sale', who can still suffer over the suffering of others, who has not acquired fully the 'having' mode of existence – briefly, a person who has remained a person and not become a thing – cannot help feeling lonely, powerless, isolated in present-day society. He cannot help doubting himself and his own convictions, if not his sanity. He cannot help suffering, even though he can experience moments of joy and clarity that are absent in the life of his 'normal' contemporaries. Not rarely will he suffer from neurosis that results from the situation of a sane man living in an insane society, rather than that of the more conventional neurosis of a sick man trying to adapt himself to a sick society.

Indeed, how can we not get depressed when reading the newspapers today or watching our politicians go about their business with such confident incompetence? How can we not grieve the wildlife and natural habitat being destroyed each moment? What parent can look to the future and not feel a foreboding dread at what world their children and grandchildren will inherit? At the same time, and because of that dread, it is hard to maintain the emotional resources to care for strangers or 'join a movement' when stress, agitation, worry and busyness clutter our mental lives. This can make society seem like a harsh place, lacking in generosity of spirit or compassion. Trump may have lost the 2020 election, but seventy-odd million voters in the US thought this most divisive pathological liar deserved a second term as president. Granted, Biden is about as inspiring as an old potato, but one would have thought the lesser of two evils was breathtakingly obvious.

As I see things, cultural disenchantment is capitalism's most significant achievement; its function is to ensure that we, the people, often lack the energy to mobilise in resistance or renewal. The austerity politics of neoliberalism are siphoning ever more of us into the 'precarariat' – the growing class of workers who live anxiously with the financial insecurity that flows from the casualisation of the workforce. No doubt the pandemic has expanded its ranks and cast even more into unemployment. All this can curdle the imagination and tempt one to despair.

I am reminded of a 2003 poem by Michael Leunig that speaks to our current condition nearly twenty years later:

They took him on a stretcher  
To the Home for the Appalled  
Where he lay down in a corner  
And he bawled and bawled and bawled.  
'There's nothing wrong with me,' he wailed,  
When asked about his bawling,  
'It's the world that needs attention;  
It's so utterly appalling.'

Whether it's from watching white supremacists march or listening to climate deniers speak from platforms in parliament and mass media, a nausea sets in, a sickness not so much of the mind but of the soul. To be mentally and spiritually disturbed in the face of today's overlapping cultural, economic and ecological crises is, I maintain, a sign that one's faculties are intact, that one's heart has not fully closed up shop. This is an existential diagnosis, not a medical or psychiatric one. It would be wrong to make peace with this madness. The world we live in should not be treated as normal, and it should not be a sign of good health to become 'well adjusted' to a society that is casually practising ecocide, celebrating narcissism, institutionalising racism and assessing the value of all things according to the cold logic of profit maximisation.

We must not assume behaviour that makes an individual 'functional' within a sick society is sufficient evidence of their sanity. In such a society, it is okay not to feel okay, to cry and feel grief, to feel dread and alienation. In our tears, let us find solidarity, for we are not alone. Remember this when you wake up prematurely in the morning with an anxiety without object, or as you stare at the ceiling late at night as you try to fall asleep. You are not losing your mind. It is precisely because you have a grip on reality that reality seems so out of whack.

Let me return to the Parable of the Poisoned Well. On a third reading I noticed something I had missed – it was the watchman, the man who warned the king not to drink the poisoned water the rest of the citizenry had already consumed. Wanting to quash the revolutionary sentiment, the king succumbed to public pressure and eventually drank from the well in order to fit in. But what about the watchman himself? Is it possible he never drank the poisoned water and remained sane in an insane society – even if that made him seem mad?

Perhaps my thoughts here are the thoughts of a watchman, someone who has tried not to drink the Kool-Aid, who has attempted to resist the pathology of normalcy. Admittedly, I have questioned my own sanity at times – when, for example, I've found myself dancing in the middle of a busy intersection with Extinction Rebellion, risking arrest. What has driven me to act in a way that sees me surrounded by police with batons, guns and pepper spray?

They sure look mad.

Call me crazy if you must, but I'll finish with these words, often attributed to Friedrich Nietzsche: 'Those who were seen dancing were thought to be insane by those who could not hear the music.'

This work originally appeared in 2021 in *Griffith Review 72: States of Mind*. It is reproduced on the Climate Justice Observatory with permission of the author and thanks to Griffith Review.

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