

## EDITORIAL

### REGAINING SANITY

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To name a special edition of a journal of natural and social philosophy *Regaining Sanity* might seem a little odd. However, when the original meaning of ‘sanity’ is examined, this should become more intelligible. The online etymological dictionary gives the history of the term: ‘Early 15c., "healthy condition," from Middle French *sanité* "health," from Latin *sanitatem* (nominative *sanitas*) "health, sanity," from *sanus* "healthy; sane" (see *sane*). Meaning "soundness of mind" first attested c. 1600.’ There is clearly a close relationship between the notion of sanity and health, which includes ‘soundness of mind’. What then does health mean? The same etymological dictionary has this to say: ‘Old English *hælp* "wholeness, a being whole, sound or well," from Proto-Germanic *\*hailitho*, from PIE *\*kailo-* "whole, uninjured, of good omen" (source also of Old English *hal* "hale, whole;" Old Norse *heill* "healthy;" Old English *halig*, Old Norse *helge* "holy, sacred;" Old English *hælan* "to heal").’ So, sanity pertains to health and wholeness, insanity to sickness and fragmentation. Regaining sanity implies regaining health, implying regaining wholeness.

One philosopher who paid particular attention to the etymology of words, having begun his career as a philologist, was Friedrich Nietzsche. If he invoked a notion of health he would have had a clear idea of what he was invoking. Nietzsche famously characterized philosophers as physicians of culture. Nietzsche saw culture as central to human life and believed that strong and healthy cultures would create distinguished, creative, and powerful individuals, whereas weak and fragmented cultures would create mediocre and inferior beings. A sick culture, according to Nietzsche, is a fragmented culture, and a healthy culture is characterized by wholeness. It is these sick cultures that require physicians. So, in titling this special edition ‘regaining sanity’ I am claiming there is a serious problem. We have a sick culture, a fragmented culture that is not conducive to soundness of mind or sanity of those who are formed by it. It is producing uncreative people lacking courage

and integrity (a term which also implies wholeness), and so unable to face up to and grapple effectively with the problems confronting their communities, societies, civilization and humanity, and incapable of effectively challenging the power of the corporatocracy and their collaborators who have massively concentrated wealth, precarized work and livelihoods, pulverised communities, subverted public institutions, undermined democracy and crippled governments.

If we accept that the main task of philosophers as physicians of culture is to achieve cultural sanity, why should there be any talk of *regaining* sanity? Alfred North Whitehead argued that European culture lost its coherence with the Seventeenth Century scientific revolution resulting in a dualism manifest in the opposition between the sciences and the humanities, a dualism that could account for all that is weak and irresolute in the modern world. Nietzsche argued that the culture of European civilization lost its sanity with Christianity, manifesting itself in the nihilism of modernity in which life appears to have lost all meaning, where the question ‘Why?’ finds no answer. Heidegger argued that this nihilism had deeper roots in the ancient Greeks with the work of Plato having misunderstood the pre-Socratics. Doesn’t this indicate that Europeans have been insane from the beginning? Isn’t this the root cause of destructiveness of European civilization which, having conquered almost the entire world now threatens to destroy the ecological conditions for our continued existence? But then are other civilizations any better? Or primitive societies, which did not suffer from overpopulation because they were so prone to killing each other? The problem could be even worse than the insanity of European civilization. Slavoj Žižek, influenced by Schelling and Lacan, suggests that humans are essentially a mistake, the product of a God who in creating humans overestimated his abilities. If so, how can we *regain* our sanity?

One answer to this is that there are degrees of sanity, and our culture is on a downward trajectory after a period of relative sanity, following the insanity of two world wars, a great depression, Naziism and Stalinism. Our current culture has become increasingly fragmented, making people less sane than ever. There is ample evidence for this fragmentation, and for growing insanity. The German sociologist Ulrich Beck described our current state as ‘reflexive modernity’, characterized by an almost complete loss of faith in the supposed experts, who can be counted on to disagree with each other over almost everything, including what counts as a healthy diet. We live in a risk society, subject to and being held responsible for decisions

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made by powerful people over whom we have no control or even minor influence, without any authoritative guidance on what decisions to make. The decisions made by these power elites can destroy people's livelihoods and lock in trajectories to disaster for organizations, communities and even civilization. The Polish/English sociologist Zygmunt Bauman characterized our culture as 'liquid modernity' where change is accelerating so rapidly that it is almost impossible to comprehend what is happening. We have created a global society of consumers in which ethics has no place, where we are consuming life, and where instead of forming groups, people swarm, attracted to ever changing and ever moving targets. These swarms have no dissenters or rebels; only people who have strayed from the swarm. Philip Dick suggested such people live in a fake reality, and as he observed in 'How to Build a Universe That Doesn't Fall Apart Two Days Later', 'Fake realities will create fake humans. Or, fake humans will generate fake realities and sell them to other humans, turning them, eventually, into forgeries of themselves.'

Opponents of such critical perspectives point to the advances that have been achieved by civilization, especially over the last half century under the influence of neoliberalism and the globalization of the economy. The world may not be what it was, but it never was what it was. There are now a smaller proportion of the world's population living in abject poverty, people are living much longer than ever before almost everywhere, and ordinary people in the developed countries have access to exotic food from all corners of the world that is better and more interesting than the food consumed by kings and emperors only a few centuries ago (which partly accounts for the obesity crisis). While there are some wars, proportionately, relative to the past, humanity has never been so free of war and violent conflict. People also have access to goods that were undreamt of in the past, including radios, televisions, computers, the internet, mobile phones and other forms of information technology, and 'ordinary' people can now travel around the world in jets. Young people have been liberated from the backbreaking work that was the lot of most people in the past and have never had so many opportunities. While there are problems, these will be dealt with by advanced forms of technology, the development of which has been liberated through the liberation of markets, and apparent difficulties such as global warming present new opportunities. As Ekin Erkan reported in a contribution to this edition: 'Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, ... recently told diplomats at a meeting of the Arctic Council in Finland that the rapidly warming

Arctic region will present abundant economic opportunities for offshore resources like gas, oil, uranium, gold, and rare earth minerals.<sup>7</sup> Anticipating a warmer future and its benefits, US President Donald Trump offered to buy Greenland from Denmark.

This rosy picture has been challenged by critics who see the advance of technology, which in the past improved people's lives, now directed at controlling or distracting them, with the ultimate goal to render them superfluous to the economy and powerless to resist their exclusion from society. Environmentalists claim we are facing global ecological destruction with mass extinction of species on land and in the oceans, and climate destabilization that is likely to lead to a runaway greenhouse effect. Some economists have suggested that not acting quickly to deal with climate change before this happens will cost in excess of a hundred trillion dollars. Ecologists and climate scientists see this failure as an existential threat to civilization and even humanity. At very least it will result in billions of people dying, and there will be massive destruction of non-human life-forms.

Defenders of the existing order retort that this is exactly what people were saying in the 1970s. Population growth and increasing consumption of resources were then claimed to be unsustainable. Now we have more than twice the world's population, and people are more affluent than ever.

This argument is challenged in turn. That it is climate change rather than shortage of minerals that has become the crucial environmental issue is not overly significant. Environmentalists argue that exponential growth is unsustainable and must lead eventually to collapse, and the world system of free market capitalism with different centres of power competing with each for dominance and control of resources makes it inevitable that this system will destroy the conditions of its existence. It is difficult to pinpoint exactly how and when these limits will be reached and a collapse will occur, but as this limit is approached it can be expected that efforts to solve one problem will exacerbate others. Past civilizations as they approached collapse were characterized by intensified competition between centres of power and intensified exploitation of the general population, associated with increasing disparities of wealth. The overall effect of all this has been to intensify pressure on environments.

In line with this, it is argued that what genuine economic growth there has been over the last fifty years has been associated with massive concentrations of power,

wealth and income in the top 0.1% of the world's population, the real beneficiaries of this supposed economic growth, while the rest of the population in most countries are increasingly disempowered, disinherited, indebted and rendered economically insecure, surveilled and suppressed, with democracy having been subverted and all the achievements of the welfare state being dismantled. Thomas Picketty has backed up this assessment with solid statistical evidence. This is not to deny figures that show many people have been elevated from their state of abject poverty, but almost all of these have been in one country, China, where it has been accompanied by massive environmental problems. Education has been degraded and young people, cheated of their future and disoriented by bad education, are suffering unprecedented levels of anxiety and depression. Environmentalists argue that recent wars fought over what are left of the world's resources, most importantly oil, portend far greater conflicts in the future. The peace we have at present is similar to the peace leading up to World War I.

All these conflicting interpretations of our condition manifest the chaotic state of our culture where proponents of opposing positions simply talk past each other. Most importantly, this chaos manifests the loss of direction of civilization. Where then are the physicians of culture to provide direction? There are some voices coming from people who do appear to have seen more clearly than others the trajectory we are on. The Swedish teenager Greta Thunberg has gained international attention by declaring the world is on fire, and the politicians who should be responding to this, are ignoring the people and dithering. She has seen the connection between global ecological destruction and the subversion of democracy. Equally clear sighted is Nick Land. He sees the trajectory we are on much as does Greta Thunberg, but applauds this trajectory. Influenced by George Bataille, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari and other French poststructuralists lauded by the critical humanities (or post-humanities) of the 1980s and 90s, he is hostile to democracy, praises CEO/presidents and praises techno-capitalism. He argues for 'accelerationism', celebrating the dynamics of capitalism for its increasingly frequent and rapid technological revolutions, moving us to the singularity predicted by Ray Kurzweil where artificial intelligence will advance beyond and supersede human intelligence. Defending nihilistic materialism, speculative realism and 'cosmism', he argues that humans should accept their eventual demise. From the perspective of cosmism, it would be a cosmic tragedy if

humanity freezes evolution at the puny human level.

It is here that our current civilization manifests most fully its insanity. Greta Thunberg is an autistic obsessive-compulsive Swedish teenager. Land taught philosophy at Warwick University, one of the world's most progressive philosophy departments, researching cybernetic culture. He currently works as an editor at Urbanatomy in Shanghai, China, one of the world's most dynamic cities. Most academics, apart from neoclassical economists, regard Greta Thunberg as the sane one, yet the vast majority share the deep assumptions on which Land based his conclusions. They are libertarians and globalists and are addicted to new high-tech consumer products, having this in common not only with Land but with the neoclassical economists who have dominated government policies since the 1970s, and the corporatocracy. It is extremely difficult to find philosophers today not proclaiming their individuality and swarming to keep up with the latest politically correct intellectual fashions, consequently acting in the interests of the power elites while claiming to be on the side of the angels. This is why the opponents of the views expressed and defended by Land and opponents of the new global corporatocracy are almost completely impotent.

Not since the end of Greek civilization or the end of the Roman Empire have intellectual elites appeared so confused about their current condition and where civilization should be going, or have been so impoverished in their efforts to project an alternative vision of future to challenge the destructive trajectory of current civilization. If defenders of the existing order and its trends display an appalling inability to face up to the problems engendered by late modernity, or as seems more likely, are indifferent to these problems and even hope to gain from them in some way, critics of the existing order show an even more appalling inability to acknowledge achievements of the past, to build on these achievements and to uphold or define goals for humanity that are worth striving for. Here, among the intellectuals, we can most clearly see a loss of sanity.

The contributors to this special edition can all be seen to be grappling with this situation, even if only obliquely, taking seriously the challenge of coming to terms with the current state of the world and to recover sanity. The contributions were not solicited, and if there is some coherence to this edition it is because of the state of the world that contributors are responding to, and the focus of the journal *Cosmos & History* which provides a platform to advance ideas that grapple with the big

issues confronting civilization. Some of the contributions are efforts to comprehend this situation, most importantly, the psychology of people in this peculiar world where young people are depoliticised, afraid of responsibility, and appear happy (despite evidence of widespread anxiety and depression) to swarm. Some papers are critical of various aspects of the present, for instance, the illusory freedom that goes with the power to modify ourselves through technology. Some utilize current social theorists, notably Bernard Stiegler. However, most contributions can be seen as attempts to recover the lost wisdom of earlier thinkers, often reinterpreting these thinkers to reveal their deeper insights. These contributions can be seen as attempts to recover the lost plot, the narrative of the quest for wisdom, liberation and justice, and to see how it was lost, where intellectual life went off the rails.

One of the great achievements of scholarship over recent decades has been the reassessment of the work of post-Kantian philosophers, philosophers accepting Kant's arguments for the creative powers of human cognition, but going beyond him to challenge Cartesian/Newtonian cosmology. This has involved a reassessment of Fichte, Schelling and Coleridge, but also others. It is the failure to appreciate these achievements that have distorted our understanding of intellectual history and various subsequent thinkers, including Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche and the pragmatists, most importantly, C.S. Peirce who characterized himself as a Schellingian of some stripe, and also major figures in science, including Faraday, Darwin, and Maxwell as well as more recent scientists. For this reason, I have put six papers that highlight this tradition first. The first is on Schiller and Novalis on the notion of *Aufhebung*, showing how this illuminates the work of Hegel and all post-Kantian philosophy. This is followed by a paper on Peirce and the challenge and potential of biosemiotics in the tradition of Schellingian science to transform our understanding of life and ourselves and our place in nature required to overcome ecological destruction. Another is on Schelling himself, showing how Schelling allows us to appreciate the dark side of nature and humanity and how this problematises efforts to found an ecological civilization on ecological theory. There are also two contributions concerned to resuscitate aspects of Marx's work, one of these by supplementing Marx with Whiteheadian philosophy. Then there is a study of speculative realism and speculative materialism, focussing on the work of Ernst Bloch. While both the currently popular speculative realism and the speculative materialism of Bloch are critiqued, the superiority and importance of Bloch's work

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over currently fashionable philosophers is clearly brought out. Bloch was strongly influenced by Schelling and medieval Islamic Aristotelian philosophy and grappled with the failure of opponents of Naziism in Germany in the 1930s. His work reveals the importance of an inspiring vision of the future.

These provide a context to appreciate the significance of other papers. Agustin Ostachuk investigates and critiques the matrix that gave rise to the notions of natural selection and immunity, central concepts underpinning social Darwinism that largely drives the direction people are now choosing for society. This is followed by contributions specifically concerned to understand the present and overcome its deficiencies, utilizing past thinkers. A problem in the present is a failure to appreciate just how ruthless power elites can be. Michel Weber makes this point by arguing for the superiority of George Orwell's portrayal in *1984* of the techno-scientific world we are entering over Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. A contribution by Erkan shows how Deleuze's work on control can be developed to reveal its all-encompassing and pernicious effects, and how these might be avoided. Lacan's psychoanalytic theories are utilized by Thiessen to comprehend the peculiar psychology of people in a globalized world where place has no place. This could explain the weird political passivity of young people in particular and their propensity to swarm. Another contribution examines the drive by people for happiness through their technological enhancement, critiquing the transhumanist concept of morphological freedom. Authors from the Kabardino-Balkar Republic of Russia critique the idea of post-history, invoking Ortega Y Gasset's and Jean Baudrillard's work on 'mass' society while referring back to Erich Fromm's work, *Fear of Freedom* (originally published in 1942 to explain the rise to Naziism), to account for the passivity of people that made the idea of 'post-history' plausible.

Other papers are more technical. There is an effort to interpret a major achievement of Frege, one of the founders of analytic philosophy, by examining this achievement in relation to Hegel's philosophy. The paper serves to show that Hegel could have dealt with this problem, while at the same being more profound. Another paper clarifies crucial differences between recently influential French 'poststructuralist' thinkers, Derrida, Deleuze and Foucault, showing the fundamental differences between them and their limited objectives. This could serve to recuperate the value of their work from their purported followers, the deconstructive postmodernists and their successors who have ignored these



differences in defending their own views.

The later papers are more focussed on preserving or fostering the conditions for a better world. The work of Lacan is drawn upon by Kirk Turner to challenge people to face up to the possibility of human extinction, revealing thereby the fragile unity of the psychological assemblages from which they are pieced together. Turner suggests that this could overcome the universalized narcissism, along with the forms of domination with which it is invariably coupled, enabling people to face up to the destructive course they are engaged in vis-à-vis Earth's natural environment. Another contributor, Paolo Pitari, examines the work of Emanuele Severino on scientific specialization. *Cosmos & History* is devoted to overcoming the tunnel vision engendered by overspecialization. Severino values such transdisciplinary work, but points out that the greatest achievements of modern civilization have been engendered by specialization. Without appreciating this, transdisciplinary work becomes undisciplined and adds to the fragmentation of culture. Severino shows how transdisciplinary work needs to be rethought accordingly. While confronting the enormous problems facing us would seem to require intense focus, one contributor argues for the importance of distraction. In another paper, Magdalena Holy-Łuczaj builds on Heidegger's work by developing a notion of 'shapeability', bringing into focus how beings shape each other, thus providing the basis for an ecological ethic. The last paper by Glenn McLaren focusses on health and its relation to ecological civilization. 'Health', implying 'wholeness' and even what is sacred is one of the few evaluative terms that have escaped the relativistic nihilism of current culture. McLaren builds on this to envisage a genuinely alternative future for humanity.

Finally, there are three review articles and one review, each of which is relevant to the renewed quest for sanity. Firstly, there is a review of Heidegger's profound study of Heraclitus, revealing how Heidegger developed his ontological logic. Then Thomas Moynihan examines a major work of the Iranian philosopher Reza Negerestani, *Intelligence and Spirit*, and another contributor, Vincent Le, discusses the work of Negerstrani, specifically in relation to (and in opposition to) the work of Nick Land. Finally, Ekin Erkan reviews Moynihan's *Spinal Catastrophism*.

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