

THE FUTURE OF INSANITY

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Insanity in individuals is something rare—but in groups,
parties, nations, and epochs it is the rule

Friedrich Nietzsche¹

Whom the gods would destroy they
first make mad.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow²

¹ *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Helen Zimmern (Radford, VA: Wilder, 2008), 56. Other translations prefer *madness* to *insanity*, but the import is the same.

² From “The Masque of Pandora,” 1875, but in one form or another it is an ancient adage.

The simplest definition of insanity is, “Extreme foolishness; total folly.”³ At first glance, Nietzsche’s dictum seems bizarre: Is extreme foolishness and total folly really the rule in human affairs? Perhaps not everywhere or at all times, but history is indeed marked by madness, and our own age is no exception. In fact, we may be the maddest of all. To cite just the latest report from the climate front, we are approaching one or more tipping points that could trigger an inexorable slide into “Hothouse Earth,” a state utterly incompatible with life as we know it.⁴ Yet we are only gesturing at solutions, when what is required is “a deep transformation based on a fundamental reorientation of human values, equity, behavior, institutions, economies, and technologies.”⁵ If this is not extreme foolishness and total folly, then what is?⁶

However, what Nietzsche had in mind is something more common—namely, an ordinary feature of human history rather than an uncommon development threatening to extinguish the possibility of civilization itself. As Nietzsche did not explain his thinking, we turn to Gustave Le Bon’s *The Crowd: A Study in Popular Philosophy* (1896) to understand the origin and nature of collective madness. Le Bon is sometimes dismissed as reactionary, but his account, published over two hundred years ago, remains a seminal work on crowd psychology. And he was by no means the first or the last to see the dangers lurking in crowds. As Aristotle said in his *Politics*, “[man] is born with weapons for wisdom and virtue which it is possible to employ entirely for the opposite ends.”⁷ Hence, “when sundered from law and justice,” he can become “the most unholy and savage of animals,” a fact amply borne out by ancient Greek history.⁸ Thucydides’s gripping account of the civil war in Corcyra would be sufficient by itself to inspire a fear of popular madness.⁹ Because Le Bon addresses a perennial problem, he has had an enduring impact both intellectually and politically, as we shall see below.

Le Bon’s essential point is that crowds amplify every human defect and manifest new ones of their own. In crowds, said Le Bon, independent minds are submerged in a collective mind that stifles dissent and stirs up emotion at the expense of intellect. Hence crowds are moved by simple ideas, striking images, and repeated slogans that drive out deeper thought. To make matters worse, the anonymity of crowds induces individuals to behave viscerally, discarding

³ *American Heritage Dictionary*, 1975 edition

⁴ Trajectories of the Earth System in the Anthropocene, Will Steffen, Johan Rockström, et al., PNAS August 14, 2018. 115 (33) 8252-8259; <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1810141115>

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Another folly: mortgaging the future with ever-increasing debt.

⁷ Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 1944, I, i

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ It was their knowledge of this history that led the framers of the American Constitution to establish checks on popular democracy.

both prudence and morality. In addition, because crowds are moved by images that are not logically connected or rooted in fact, members of crowds have a hard time distinguishing between reality and illusion. Thus, said Le Bon,

Crowds are only powerful for destruction. Their rule is always tantamount to a barbarian phase. A civilization involves fixed rules, discipline, a passing from the instinctive to the rational state, forethought for the future, an elevated degree of culture—all of them conditions that crowds, left to themselves, have invariably shown themselves incapable of realizing.¹⁰

Freud, Jung, and other depth psychologists elucidated the dynamic underlying Le Bon's description: crowds are subject to "psychic contagion." Unless the irrational forces within the human mind are culturally and socially contained, they can go on a rampage, leading to mass manias, collective delusions, and religious frenzies. "The masses," said Jung, "always incline to herd psychology, hence they are easily stampeded; and to mob psychology, hence their witless brutality and hysterical emotionalism."¹¹ All of which, said Le Bon, makes crowds ripe for demagogic leadership by "men of action . . . recruited from the ranks of those morbidly nervous excitable half-deranged persons who are bordering on madness."¹²

If this last brings to mind Adolf Hitler and all the other madmen in the grip of insane ideologies who killed millions of people and inflicted immense suffering on the human race during the 20th century, then Nietzsche and Le Bon are not so easily dismissed.¹³ If anything, recent developments, such as television, have rendered them both more cogent and more salient.

All media present an abstract and selective version of reality, but compared to print television is not an informative medium at all, but a dramatic one: it transmits images, not ideas; it evokes emotions, not thoughts; and it arouses passion, not deliberation. Indeed, at its worst, it is frankly inflammatory. . . . [At best], because it portrays the

¹⁰ *The Crowd*, xiii.

¹¹ Carl G. Jung, *The Practice of Psychotherapy*, trans. Gerhard Adler and R. F. C. Hull (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 6.

¹² *The Crowd*, 73

¹³ For what it is worth, the Wikipedia article on Le Bon contains the following paragraph: George Lachmann Mosse claimed that fascist theories of leadership that emerged during the 1920s owed much to Le Bon's theories of crowd psychology. Adolf Hitler is known to have read *The Crowd* and in *Mein Kampf* drew on the propaganda techniques proposed by Le Bon.[46][47] Benito Mussolini also made a careful study of Le Bon.[48] Le Bon also influenced Vladimir Lenin and the Bolsheviks.[49]

world in ever small “bites” of sound and image, television creates what is tantamount to a cartoon of reality.¹⁴

To make matters worse, this caricature is grossly distorted by commercialism: “The purpose of television is to lure a mass audience with mass entertainment so that mass advertising can promote mass consumption.”¹⁵ In effect, television creates the preconditions for an electronic mob exhibiting on a societal or even global scale all the defects and dangers of Le Bon’s crowd.¹⁶

These defects and dangers are greatly amplified by the internet, which gives this mob a voice, provides even greater anonymity (“On the internet, nobody knows you’re a dog”), and sidelines the gatekeepers who once policed public discourse. Thus the marketplace of ideas has become an epistemological free-for-all—an anarchy—and anarchies rarely do well in the long term.¹⁷

The ideologues who celebrated the radical openness of the internet reckoned without human nature. Absent sophisticated and responsible gatekeepers, public discourse is subject to Gresham’s Law. Bad ideas and information drive out good; saner voices are drowned out by a digital mob of charlatans, schemers, extremists, and trolls disgorging misinformation, disinformation, and venom.¹⁸ Yes, “elite” gatekeepers have biases, blind spots, and axes to grind, but these can usually be kept in check by competing gatekeepers. To expect a good result from throwing the crooked timber of humanity together into one giant arena, instead of allowing the truest timbers to set standards and make rules, is a kind of madness.

Human beings are herd animals who find it hard to keep their heads when everyone around them is losing theirs. Indeed, to depart too far from what is “normal” risks being judged “crazy.” To be sane can therefore mean going against the grain of a society intent on imposing its mindset and mores. Relatively few will even make the attempt, and those who do soon discover that their options are limited or require an inordinate sacrifice. In this way, the accepted madness—in our case, the insane ideology that puts us on a trajectory toward the tipping points—prevails until it brings on the wrath of the gods.

¹⁴ Ophuls, *Requiem for Modern Politics*, 81-82.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹⁶ Many of the issues touched on in this essay are treated at greater length in *ibid.*, chap. 2, 6, and 7.

¹⁷ Some governments, China first and foremost, are now beginning to police their national networks, which only means that anarchy will be replaced by despotism.

¹⁸ A recent example of mob rule online: enraged Twitterers forced the editor of *The New Yorker* to rescind a controversial invitation. See Bret Stephens, “Now Twitter Edits The New Yorker,” *New York Times*, September 4, 2018.

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