

ORCHESTRATED IRRATIONALITY: WHY IT EXISTS AND HOW IT MIGHT BE RESISTED

by Paul Tyson

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Orchestrated Irrationality

Why It Exists and How It Might Be Resisted

Paul Tyson

Abstract

Orchestrated irrationality in our public discourse is produced by technologically enhanced and commercially purposed atomization and tribalism. Public discourse now leans away from a humane, free, and reasoned political rationality and towards self-interested, calculative, herd conformism. The bulls and bears of consumer society have largely displaced the civic logic of the liberal democratic pursuit of the common good. The power interests that govern global consumerism are enhanced by subordinating the common good ends of genuinely political life to the self-interested and profit driven dynamics of the market. Orchestrated irrationality in our public discourse makes politics into a meaningless theatre of incommensurate tribal interest narratives, which is a convenient distraction from the collaborative consolidation of market power and state control. This orchestrated irrationality can only be combatted by seeking to de-atomize citizens and de-tribalize the public square in order to recover the priority of political life over market and authoritarian power in our public discourse. That is, a postcapitalist civilization that is oriented to a genuinely political and universally moral rationality must replace the present global order. Once we can identify the problem and the direction of cure for orchestrated irrationality, we can then take steps towards a different civilizational life-world.

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Orchestrated Irrationality

The fascinating phrase ‘orchestrated irrationality’ was used in a brief email to me to by Yanis Varoufakis, to describe some of the frightening, now normal, goings on in the domain of public discourse.¹ In the context of that email, this phrase does not refer to any cunning or sinister conspiracy. Rather, it refers to something far more humdrum and out-in-the-open. What now seems to be happening is that the very structures of public discourse have taken on deeply irrational and also highly moralizing and conformist characteristics. Yet there is no centralized Ministry of Propaganda rigidly controlling right thinking in the public square. Indeed, any *orchestration* would be denied by the chief exponents of public opinion, who see the way public discourse is defined by a strikingly unified conformity to a narrow range of virtuous truisms as a function of moral and logical certainty,

¹ More on that email later.

rather than of blinkered irrationality. So this orchestration is not a conscious or State run conspiracy, it is a structural dynamic now governing the normative and conformist features of public discourse. What perceptive non-conformists — like Varoufakis — are seeing is that there is now a powerful structural bias in the assumed rules of public discourse itself that leans a narrow band of ‘right’ public opinions (ortho-doxies) in an anti-humanitarian, anti-universal-human-rights, and even anti-political-realists direction.

Liberal democratic rationality in decline

It now seems possible that civic discourse in search of the common good, which can then be politically actualized through a constructively adversarial democratic process, is becoming structurally unattainable. This is not because anyone has plotted the demise of liberal democracy, and it is not because we are civically inferior to our ancestors. Though, civic health is always going up and down, and much of this fluctuation is related to how the modes of political life are fitting or not fitting the changing circumstances of actual power in any given polity. For this reason, a fair and good civic life is never easy, is never finally attained, and is always imperfect.² Civic health is always somewhere along the normal historical arc of birth, rise, decline, and collapse.

Liberal democracy itself, and politics in the mass media and big data age, is a very recent form of life. Under more normal

² See Oliver O'Donovan & Joan O'Donovan, *Bonds of Imperfection*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004 for an examination of the long-standing Western tradition of treating the structures of power as necessary but inherently imperfect.

civilizational time scales, our political form of life would still be in its dynamic youth. Yet — due to the astonishingly rapid rate of social, technological and commercial change³ — the conditions that enabled the birth and rise of liberal parliamentary democracy may now have altered so much that its decline and collapse is unstoppable. Our situation might even be more serious than that. Perhaps we are seeing the erosion of politics itself.

Coupled with the suspicion that ‘bottom up’ civically empowered and politically meaningful public discourse doesn’t happen much anymore, is the idea that power itself is no longer genuinely responsive to the public within our democratic institutions. It seems that ever more sweeping, centralized and forceful executive security measures, and ever more invasive surveillance and controls — for our safety and protection of course — are increasingly being normalized by the State,⁴ and global Corporate power is forming increasingly close alliances with States.⁵ As the global order itself becomes less stable, greater safety measures imposed on us are being normalized that fly in the teeth of old fashioned liberal democratic norms.⁶ What then — we might well ask — does liberal democratic politics look like if

³ John R McNeill & Peter Engelke, *The Great Acceleration*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2014; Paul Virilio, *The Great Accelerator*, Cambridge: Polity, 2012.

⁴ Phillip Adams notes that since the year 2000, the Australian Parliament has introduced over 90 sweeping surveillance and security bills through parliament. See here: Phillip Adams in conversation with Lizzie O’Shea, ‘How Australia’s pile of national security legislation stacks up’ Late Night Live, ABC Radio National, 22 September 2021. <https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/latenightlive/how-australias-pile-of-national-security-legislation-stacks-up/13553368>

⁵ Lee Drutman, *The Business of America is Lobbying*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

⁶ Paul Virilio, *The Administration of Fear*, Cambridge MA: Semiotext(e), 2007.

democracy is increasingly insignificant to power and we can no longer be liberals?⁷

So what *does* national politics mean if the nation state itself is hardly a serious choice maker anymore? Under neoliberal globalization, power seems to be migrating away from autonomous nation states who are reasonably in control of the civic conditions of their own people, and who are accountable to their citizens for the civic and economic conditions of that nation through democratic elections. Power seems to be migration from the nation state itself and is increasingly dictated *to* states by overpowering global financial, communications and commercial non-state players. Trans-national corporate heavyweights who call the shots of econometric necessity to most states, make the idea of power being politically accountable to citizens something of a sad joke. What does public and political discourse actually mean in this context? Does it mean anything at all really? Are we ‘outgrowing’ liberal democratic nation state politics?

When it comes to power, the times are in transition, and this age of power transition is impacting our political structures and civic norms in ways we have not yet clearly identified, let alone though about how to address. To that end, thinking about ‘orchestrated irrationality’ warrants serious attention.

⁷ This is the question asked in Stan Grant, *With the Falling of the Dusk*, Sydney: HarperCollins, 2021.

The argument in outline

The basic argument of this short paper goes like this. Orchestrated irrationality in our public discourse is produced by technologically enhanced atomization and tribalism.⁸ The commercial enhancement of both atomization and tribalism now shapes our public discourse because the self-interested ‘animal spirits’ of consumer society have overrun the civic logic of the openly reasoned and publicly contested pursuit of the common good. The power interests that govern global consumerism are enhanced by subordinating the common good ends of genuinely political life to the self-interested and profit driven dynamics of the market. Our politicians themselves can no longer see the difference between political logic and market logic. Orchestrated irrationality in our public discourse makes politics into a meaningless theatre of incommensurate and constructed tribal interest narratives, which is a convenient distraction from the collaborative consolidation of market power and state control. This orchestrated irrationality can only be combatted by seeking to de-atomize citizens and de-tribalize the public square in order to recover the priority of political life over market and authoritarian power in our public discourse.

⁸ By tribalism I do not mean *real* tribal society, I actually mean *virtual* tribalism, as produced by on-line commercialized ‘social’ network media. Here, the virtual ‘tribe’ one identifies with as belonging too is not a real community of blood related and location and culture embedded people one actually knows intimately. Rather it is a constructed ‘herd type’ comprised of consumed and marketed ‘identities’, interests and agendas that the consumer wishes to identify with and be networked with. And here, what tribes one can belong to is mediated to you via algorithmic super-computer network providers, who have their own commercial agendas which they pursue via virtual tribalization. This is not a real tribal dynamic at all.

Atomization and tribalism

In the 21st century, public discourse has undergone a techno-enabled great acceleration of two existing trends. Social Media (Facebook was launched in 2004) and the iPhone (launched in 2007) have enhanced and normalized trends in both atomization and tribalism in ways and to extents that were hardly conceivable in the 20th century.⁹ This has powerfully impacted our political landscapes.¹⁰ Effectively the calculative and determinate logic of mass-media marketing — where voters are treated like consumers, and manipulated by marketers — has replaced the free and indeterminate logic of serious public discourse. What we now call politics is a carefully produced (and narrowly differentiated) band of public opinion options which we can then choose from as ‘political’ consumers. ‘Politics’ is now largely a spectator sport for the arena audience, pre-produced by highly effective Public Relations manipulation machineries, designed to do only one thing: influence the mass electorate so as to win elections. Once a ‘political’ party has won power, the delivery of consumer utopia — or at least the marketing and projection of consumer utopia — is the first

⁹ The profound neurological, social, psychological and political impact of these two developments is explored by many thinkers, including these: Siva Vaidhyanathan, *Anti-Social Media. How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021; (similar title, different book) John Mair et al (eds.), *Anti-Social Media? The Impact on Journalism and Society*, Suffolk: Arima, 2018; Johann Hari, *Stolen Focus*, London: Bloomsbury, 2022; Susan Grenfield, *Mind Change. How Digital Technologies are leaving the Mark on our Brains*, London: Random House, 2014; Jaron Lainer, *Ten Arguments For Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now*, London: The Bodley Head, 2018; Peter W. Singer & Emerson T. Brooking, *Like War. The Weaponization of Social Media*, Boston: HMH, 2018.

¹⁰ Cambridge Analytica is only one aspect — and a small one at that — of the political impact of Social Media.

aim of the successful politician and political party. But I digress: back to the means of civic transformation — atomization and tribalism.

The aim of both atomization (the liberating individualist sickness) and tribalism (the virtual conformist cure) is highly effective individually targeted attitude manipulation, to enhance sales. Shoshana Zuboff's probing text *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* looks closely at how this dynamic works.¹¹ The manipulative effectiveness of these technologies as harnessed by various governmental and commercial power blocks (where increasingly state and corporation act together)¹² has produced a whole new age of highly managed public opinion propaganda¹³ and targeted public discourse control. This has produced what Yanis Varoufakis has helpfully described as 'orchestrated irrationality'.

¹¹ Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, London: Profile, 2019.

¹² For example Big Pharma, Big Tech and State funding and security agencies have acted together very visibly, and in the name of biosecurity and the protection of valid public health information during the coronavirus pandemic. Whether this is a good thing (providing free and rapid covid vaccinations, tracking population movements for public health, and protecting the vulnerable and indecisive from mis-information) or a bad thing (corporations using the State for profit, expanded State surveillance, draconian crushing of public dissent and the removal of citizen civil liberties), or both, is not the issue here. The fact is, these synergies between Corporate and State power are now normal.

¹³ I have already stated that there is no Nazi or Stalin styled Ministry of Propaganda functioning on a global scale. However, this does not mean that propaganda itself is not ubiquitous to our times. See Jacques Ellul's classic text, *Propaganda*, New York: Vintage, 1965. As Ellul sees it, there is nothing inherently suspicious about propaganda, but the fact is we rely on public information that we are not in a position to check for ourselves. And the big players in public information provision — states and corporations — provide us with information that makes it easy for them to manage Mass Society as efficiently and well as possible.

Let us look quickly at how atomization and tribalism — which superficially appear to be opposite trajectories — work together against public rationality in the 21st century. Key to understanding this synergy is an understanding of atomization as an un-natural liberation of the individual from community responsibilities and pre-existing value and meaning constraints.

Liquid modernity and the erosion of civic culture

Zygmunt Bauman's very helpful analysis of liquid modernity unpacks how atomization works.¹⁴ In consumer society we are promised personal freedom and personal satisfaction. That is, we are encouraged — nay, disciplined! — to be self-focused and self-pleasing at every turn. Our life-world forms us to be consumers, to be objects of market interest, and to be enterprising market players (even as we 'sell' our labour). Here, it is profitable opportunities that drives supply, and need, personal desire, and fear that drives demand. 'Rational self-interest' in response to each individual's needs, desires and fears, is considered — to the reductively econometric — the basic motivation of all marketplace (and perhaps all human) behaviour.¹⁵

¹⁴ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity, 2012.

¹⁵ 'Rational Self-Interest' is a hopelessly reductive neo-classical econometric ideology that, for normal people, has no empirical relationship with actual economic behaviour. Advertising psychologists, marketers, and politicians understand the irrelevance of this *rationalist* and *ego-centric* ideology when it comes to why most people spend, buy, invest, save, vote, value, act, and choose the way they do. But for the instrumental and rationalist *marketer*, by-passing rational decision making and going straight to impulsive decision making, using whatever motivational hook one can find, is the main game in advertising psychology and mass-media manipulation (i.e., most forms of successful modern politics). And, of course,

But note carefully. Marketplace ‘rationality’ is here defined by explicitly self-interested instrumental categories, motivated by entirely naturalistic objectives (assuming we are all ‘material girls’ now). The ends which orients market ‘rationality’ are ultimately *sub*-rational ends. ‘Rational’ econometric self-interest harnesses our instrumental and calculative intelligence to the service of *irrational* and *instinctive* objectives: need, desire, power and fear.¹⁶ John Maynard Keynes famously described the ‘animal spirits’ of the market — its bulls and

human motivation is often strongly shaped by love for others, not simply driven by one’s own interests, and often love entails the curtailment and surrender of self-interest. For an old but still useful look at the art of advertising psychology, see Vance Packard, *Hidden Persuaders*, Brooklyn: Ig Publishing, 2007 [1957]. For recent work on the psychology of economic behaviour — endeavouring to stay within a somewhat rationalist outlook, but recognizing that the drivers of human choice are profoundly non-reducible to calculative self-interest — see Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, *Choices, Values, and Frames*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

¹⁶ David Hume, as a very powerful materialist thinker, maintained that for the modern empirically minded naturalist, reason is the slave of the passions. If one is a metaphysical materialist in the modern and reductive naturalist manner, then the only purpose of human intelligence is the service of satisfying natural appetites. Econometric ‘rational self-interest’ seems metaphysically sensible to our intellectual culture after the secularization of the European mid in the late 19th century. (See Owen Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the 19th Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.) Yet, the idea of political life as the use of speech to connect universal and transcendent truths of justice and goodness to how we seek to order human flourishing is the dominant Aristotelian, Stoic and then Christian philosophical heritage of political life itself in the Western tradition. This tradition seems now to be in terminal decline. Perhaps morally serious political rationality that aims at the *Summum Bonum* — the Highest Good, at what is good for us all — will perish from the West with the rise of materialist metaphysics and the reduction of reason to the service of the passions in the era of econometric ‘rational self-interest’.

bears — as expressions of the powerful herd located yet individualistic *irrational* drives of greed and fear.

Greed and Fear are the daemonic sub-deities (animal spirits) our calculative logic and instrumental leverage serves as we ‘rationally’ advance our own interests¹⁷ in the worship of Mammon.¹⁸ And this is our ‘rational’ world of power now: we have built a global system where the super-rich do not pay tax;¹⁹ where corporate armies, drone operators, and arms traders make up their own rules to suit themselves;²⁰ where the global financial system is intrinsically fragile and has no contact

¹⁷ See Jon Ronson, *The Psychopathy Test*, London: Picador, 2012 for a frightening exploration of the synergies between the type of people we reward as highly remunerated CEOs and purely self-interested, amoral, calculative psychopaths.

¹⁸ For readers unfamiliar with the Christian Scriptures, Mammon is the principle of wealth as the first object of worship, where the accumulation of wealth is considered the end (highest purpose) of human life. That is, where econometric rational self-interest is considered the primary aim of a successful life, the worship of Mammon is evident. Worship here — derived from ‘worth ship’ in English — concerns the first object of value and meaning to which all other values are secondary. Given that the Hebrew faith is centred on the Shema (‘Hear O Israel, the LORD is our God, the LORD is One... And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might’), Jesus of Nazareth, as a 1st century Palestinian Jew, predictably explained to his followers that ‘no-one can serve two masters...you cannot serve God and Mammon’. There can only be one object of first loyalty. From a traditional Western (Christendom embedded) perspective, econometric ‘rational self-interest’ makes Mammon the first object of worth in the realm of practical and societal action.

¹⁹ Nicholas Shaxson, *Treasure Islands: Tax Havens and the Men Who Stole the World*, London: Vintage, 2013.

²⁰ Peter W. Singer, *Corporate Warriors. The Rise of the Privatized Military Industry*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008; Andrew Feinstein, *The Shadow World Inside The Global Arms Trade*, London: Penguin, 2012. Peter W. Singer, *Wired For War. The Robotics Revolution and Conflict in the 21st Century*, London: Penguin, 2011.

with economic and natural reality;²¹ where criminal syndicates are protected within the core of global power;²² where elected governments in the Eurozone live at the behest of unelected financial power brokers;²³ where obvious truths about irreversible environmental destruction²⁴ are ignored because they are an inconvenience to business ‘realism’... that is, where absolute madness and immoral violence is business as normal. Serving the Bulls and Bears of market ‘rationality’ at the altar of Mammon, under the conditions of modern technological consumerism in a militarized to the teeth global imperium, is about as irrational and immoral as it is possible for any civilization to be. This will not end well.

But just being irrational is not enough for power in our global neoliberal consumer civilization. Market rationality must wipe out any other claim to reason. For all non-market motivations and non-commodified relational structures interfere with ‘rational’ market-place calculations and controls, and get in the way of the interests of the powers that govern our consumer life-world. In order to facilitate the atomization of free and self-pleasing individuals, it is important to untie the individual from social, civic, familial and religious structures where they belong (let us call these ‘human place and limit structures’). For non-market ties constrain the individual and limit their

²¹ Satyajit Das, *Extreme Money. Masters of the Universe and The Cult of Risk*, United States: Pearson, 2018; Steve Keen, *Can We Avoid Another Financial Crisis?* Cambridge: Polity, 2017

²² Tom Burgis, *Kleptopia. How Dirty Money is Conquering the World*, London: William Collins, 2020.

²³ Yanis Varoufakis, *Adults in the Room*, London: The Bodley Head, 2017.

²⁴ John Houghton, *Global Warming*, 5th edition, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

capacity to simply please themselves commensurate with their financial power. So we are formed to think of belonging to communities motivated by other things than ‘rational self-interest’ as oppressive constraints on our freedom. We should — so we are trained to assume — only belong to loose associations of like-minded self-interested acquaintances that we freely choose where we gain a direct animal satisfaction and benefit and have minimal responsibility towards others.

Here we come back to Baumann’s model of liquid modernity. Each one of us needs to be able to move freely, like an atom in suspension or a single celled organism in liquid, within the pipes of rational econometric plumbing. Molecules and lattice structures, or anchored colonies of organisms, clog up the pipes of free economic flow, impede the movement of individual atoms and frustrate the planning and force of the generators and harvesters of economic flow (who are also the engineers of the plumbing of economic flow, which is designed to turn the turbines of their own economic power generation). It is the middle-order²⁵ human institutions — family, local community, church/temple/mosque, school, sporting clubs, local civic and public good volunteer groups etc., and the attachment to place and any non-instrumental outlook on nature that local communities tend to have — that impede ‘rational’ econometric flow. So the aim of the ‘rational’ econometric organization of human society is to have free flowing atomized individuals that think of themselves as self-pleasing and self-interest maximizing entities only, who are in fact flowing in the powerful currents generated for them by totally impersonal and

²⁵ ‘Middle-order’ here means above the level of the individual but below the impersonal level of the government bureaucracy or the large corporate structure.

unassailable bureaucratic and corporate powers. Such organization strongly aims at keeping the pipes of economic flow clean and free flowing so as to enable the maximum wealth generating power to be drawn out of ‘the economy’ (and what other ‘rational’ purpose for politics could there be?).

Thus there are three levels of human organization: 1. the individual; 2. humanly scaled relational networks, and; 3. inhumanly scaled large bureaucratic and corporate entities. Liquid modernity is the process of purifying human society from the impediments of the middle order of human life, so as to facilitate ‘rational’ economic life.

Having radically individualized human atoms that flow freely down clean self-interest pipes, as propelled by large commercial and governmental ‘rational’ current generating forces, is the aim of liquid modernity. However, the meaning of human existence without the middle order of humanly scaled community life is inherently alienating and unfulfilling. Life without human and natural limits does not in fact produce freedom, it produces anomia, dissipation and the sordid pursuit of pleasure and power as ends in their own right (which they are not, they are means) in the vain attempt to create meaning. And it is inherently lonely. Thus, people who do not inherit roles, identities and high meanings from closely bonded human and natural relations, have to try and construct identities and purposes for themselves, and this produces levels of anxiety that are not native to more traditional human societies (that indeed do have less individual ‘freedom’). So the on-line feeding of an insatiable need to belong and an insatiable need to construct identities, and construct meaning, is a natural sign of the success of liquefaction; the success of atomization.

This is where the impetus and unique characteristics of contemporary mass media formed tribalism comes from.

Tribalism

Tribes are genuinely humanly scaled and closely bonded communities, grounded in blood relations and close living in a particular place with a distinctive culture. On-line tribalism has no relationship to actual tribes. On-line tribalism enables free floating social atoms (*un*-connected individuals) to *feel* as if they have chosen for themselves solid identities and committed communities of interest, when they in fact cannot gain what they seek via this commercially facilitated, unreal, and profoundly individualistic pathway. Which is to say that on-line tribalism is another expression of liquid modernity. Identity and belonging that is tailored to freely associating individuals is not traditional tribal belonging in any sense, but the need to belong — and the *desire* for membership in a herd — is as basic to our animal natures as sexual desire, physical need and some degree of personal power is. But on-line tribalism is constructed within a counterfeit (i.e., virtual) ‘public space’ using the same categories of ‘freedom’ and self-interest as the market does. So sectional interest advancement, the interests of my self-identified tribe, becomes the aim of politics under the conditions of on-line tribalism within liquid modernity. Politics ceases to be about the common good for the entire (and diverse) civic community to which I belong, and becomes the pursuit of my personal self-interests via the ‘political’ leverage of my tribe and my tribe’s ‘political’ representatives. Thus does political ‘logic’ devolve into the manufacture of tribalized memes that are deeply shaped by the marketized

forces that construct the options of herd identity and mass-media sectional interests, which govern consumer society.

At this point I am going to posit two species of rationality.

Two types of Reason

Market rationality does indeed use instrumental logic in a very powerful way. But market rationality does not have rational *ends* in view. It serves what I will (with qualifications) call instinctive or animal ends; power, desire, greed, fear, belonging — it serves the ‘animal spirits’ of the market.²⁶ The combination of staggeringly powerful instrumental rationality (and technologies of control) in the service of sub-rational ends characterizes market logic and the global imperialism of the neoliberal world order. Market rationality operates in the registers of necessity and instrumental power: the registers of dominant will, mastery, force, and control.

Then there is political rationality. Political rationality, going back to the ancient Greeks, seeks to operate not at the sub-linguistic power level of animal spirits, but at the distinctively human level of speech in the service of justice-concerned collective decision making.

²⁶ These animal spirits could also — perhaps more appropriately — be described as ‘the Machine’ along Paul Kingsnorth’s line of thinking. That is — to be fair to animals — a blindly purposeless acceleration of power and satiation is not what animals do, it is what we do when we think we are an omnipotent and entirely sovereign god. When we worship our own instrumental powers we construct machines to serve our own power ends, but those machines become our masters and we end up serving the idols of our own power, which has no meaningful end or value at all, and ultimately destroys all it touches. See Paul Kingsnorth, ‘The Cross and the Machine’, *First Things*, July 2021. <https://www.paulkingsnorth.net/cross>

I am married to a woman who is completely irrational, in the terms of market logic, because relationships, family bonds, communities of care and meaning, and faith, are her life. Annette is always thinking ‘how can I help people?’ ‘how can I build relationships and communities up?’ ‘how can I nurture the close bonds and high meanings that I have been born into?’. Talk, cooperation, relationships and practical care go together here. High meanings and practices of care are closely bonded here. The atomization of consumer society is constantly seeking to erode her tireless labours of love in the service of high and intrinsic meaning. But this is because — in Aristotle’s categories — Annette is a political animal, rather than a market animal, and we live in a life-world defined by market logic and market power.

So what is the fuller description of what type of animal we actually are: the political animal or the market animal?

The rationality of political animals

Aristotle describes us as political animals. Which is to say that the thing that is distinctive about human animals is the organization of our communities by means of speech. So when we deny the centrality of speech and the ability of the discursive community of citizens to act in ways that transcend personal interest and look to the common good (more of this soon), then we deny our proper human-animal nature, and become animals in a distorted and sub-human manner.²⁷ To be

²⁷ Animals, of course, cannot behave in a sub-human manner like how we can, because they do not have human language. So when we behave ‘like animals’ we allow base instincts to have a free head in ways that no animal does, because animals can’t linguistically formulate behaving in a sub-natural and merely instinctive ‘brute’ way. Acting with mute force (be that in physically primitive or intellectually

explicit, the sub-human use of politics reduces public speech and political action to a function of self and sectional power alone. This denies reasoned speech as the central, equalizing and justice concerned characteristic of political life. Thinking of speech as (reductively) a tool of power is to hold a sub-human understanding of political life, according to the perennial high philosophical traditions of the West. For speech as linking the human animal with divine reason (what the Stoics and Christians called *Logos* and Plato and Aristotle called *Nous*) — with reason that is not simply defined by necessities and instinctive desires and agonistic fears — defines the distinctive qualities of political life that is appropriate to the human animal. That is, the common good, or the highest good (the *summum bonum*) is ‘above’ personal animal self-interest, because it is not defined by natural necessities, but by rational (that is, divinely given) freedoms, and substantive (universal, objective) goods.

Political decisions, in the proper meaning of the term, are not firstly about power, they are firstly about justice. That justice and power are not identical is the central meaning of politics as a function of egalitarian civic freedom, and the thing that distinguishes genuine political authority from tyranny.²⁸ To a genuinely political rationality, then, power serves justice. In market rationality (as defined above), power and self-interest are the only end of human life, and justice is

sophisticated modes) to just get what you want, is sub-human; it is a denial of language and the community of speech. Only humans can act ‘like animals’ in this sense.

²⁸ See Yanis Varoufakis, *And The Weak Suffer As They Must?*, New York: Nation Books, 2016 for a profound rejection of the sub-human logic of imperial ‘economic realism’, of the strong doing as they will and the weak suffering as they must. To make might right is a denial of human nature as a moral and political nature.

irrelevant. Political rationality is an expression of the fulfilment of the human animal, whereas market rationality is sub-human and alienates us from our political natures, and denies that which dignifies and divinizes the human animal — rational speech as a civic activity in search of the highest good (justice for all).

We are now in a position to return to the idea of orchestrated irrationality.

Orchestrated irrationality illustrated: the Ukraine conflict

Yanis Varoufakis was recently interviewed on *UnHerd* about the conflict in the Ukraine.²⁹ His argument was simple, humane and irrefutable, if one is thinking within what we have described above as political rationality. His argument goes along these lines. The killing and destruction in the Ukraine is a humanitarian disaster that we (Western power) must stop if it is within our power to do so. It may well be within our power. If we gave Putin a firm assurance that the Ukraine will not be permitted to join NATO, on the condition that Russia withdraws from the Ukraine and allows them to be a fully self-governing nation (bar joining NATO), Putin may well accept and withdraw. The premise of this argument is that at least a major feature of this conflict concerns a proxy clash of influence between the US (via NATO) and Russia, and that at least that aspect of this conflict is something that it is within our power to influence so as to save lives. Continuing to arm the Ukraine is — to Varoufakis — justified, but this does not save

²⁹ Yanis Varoufakis, 'Ukraine cannot win this war. We have a moral duty to give Putin a way out'. *UnHerd*, 6 April 2022. <https://unherd.com/2022/04/ukraine-cannot-win-this-war/>

lives and in the end, it prolongs a conflict that Russia, by terrible means, will win. So why do we not at least try the course of action that Varoufakis recommends?

Under the conditions of reductively materialist market-oriented modernity, moralizing and tribalism are inextricable. That is, we functionally materialist consumers are moral constructivists, so there is no metaphysical framework of moral truth to appeal to. Here, what is normative to one's tribe becomes what is good as far as one's own interests are concerned. Here the idea that the good could be defined by something greater than one's own tribal interests (the idea of a genuinely universal Good) becomes meaningless. My tribe, by definition, are now the good guys — via this sub-human animal logic — and 'they' (whomever is not my tribe and who is a threat to how I understand my interests) are the bad guys. Once we make herd categories of good and evil define the public discourse (at the same time as pragmatic amoral 'political realism' still drives calculative power logic at the elite level) then no politically sensible negotiated outcome between Us and Them is possible. We refuse to think, even in entirely pragmatic categories, about some workable and imperfect common good between contending 'tribes', and make herd 'morality' into a false transcendental absolute, that justifies — nay sanctifies! — the all-out violent struggle for total dominance or total annihilation. So now Putin is an obscene war criminal who cannot be negotiated with.

Of course, it is true that Putin is a war criminal — consider Grozny and other Putin directed acts of civilian mass murder — but 'we' hardly have clean hands as we maintain a global imperium via US

military power with the cooperation of her allies,³⁰ so why are we being so pretentiously pious and not negotiating so as to avoid escalation now? Where is a bit of *realpolitik* when it might actually do some good? But now — once this type of sub-human yet absolutizing moralism is admitted — we have an unbending ‘high’ imperative to oppose Putin and to do all that we can to use this proxy conflict to destabilize Putin’s power and press hard for regime change in Russia. But this is a potentially deadly international game for the US imperium to play. Should it work (and containing China is the obvious motive for the US to give this a try) and Russia is thrown into internal chaos, then Putin’s Kremlin styled oligarchy of fabulous immorality and wealth ransacking criminality will come to an end, but what would rise in its place? And who would have control of Russia’s nuclear weapons? And what would China do in, say Taiwan, in the resulting chaos? World wars have been started by less.

So tribalizing moralism is not a *political* moral stance (in Aristotle’s sense), and the calculative so called ‘realism’ of sheer force and interest that power players tie their propaganda narratives of tribal good guys and tribal bad guys to, is not a humane rationality. Further, such a sub-human animal-spirits defined power ‘rationality’ can hardly facilitate sensible rational calculations in *realpolitik* terms either. Given the unknowable possibilities that arise when an existing structure of power (however corrupt) disintegrates, all bets are off as to what will

³⁰ For but two aspects of our own and better known US Global Imperium war atrocities, see Michael Otterman, Richard Hil, Paul Wilson, *Erasing Iraq*, London: Pluto Press, 2010; Michael Otterman, *American Torture*, London: Pluto Press, 2007. And when it comes to the lies entrenched in the official narratives we are meant to believe, such as why we (Australia) went to the Iraq war, see Andrew Wilkie, *Axis of Deceit*, Melbourne: Black Inc, 2004.

actually happen in Russia if President Biden succeeds in getting regime change. But there is an obvious military and financial ‘rationality’ in conflict escalation, and this is a ‘logic’ that the large economic machinery of our global financial plumbing and wealth turbines understand well (see Naomi Klein’s disaster capitalism).³¹ The ‘rationality’ that is at play here just happens to be the same driving logic of the basic family of interests that run the global economy and its now ‘political’ attitude formation machinery (on-line information, communication and surveillance engines) to its own financial benefit.

So yes, it is definitely *orchestrated* irrationality that prevents us from taking strong, humanitarian motivated, global common good action to at least attempt to secure a Russian retraction from the Ukraine. Yet this is a systems orchestration that reflects the structures of power that we actually live under, not any sort of cunning conspiracy.

The global imperium of political irrationality

As mentioned at the outset of this paper, the phrase ‘orchestrated irrationality’ is very interesting. ‘Orchestration’ entails the use of calculative and instrumental reason for a particular purposive aim, and this is definitely appropriate in this context. There are powerful non-political interests manipulating Western public discourse (which is atomized and tribalistically moralized) to justify our governments not taking the sort of action that would most likely actually assist the

³¹ Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine. The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, London: Penguin, 2008. See also the very disturbing 2021 movie scripted by Adam McKay and starring Leonardo DiCaprio, *Don’t Look Up* which imagines a scenario in which calculative market logic happily destroys the earth in the pursuit of profit.

cessation of hostilities in the Ukraine. This orchestration is rational, and powerfully so, but it is not politically or humanitarily rational. This orchestration is defined by market and imperial rationality which is then moralized along tribal ‘us’ (good guys) and ‘them’ (bad guys) lines. But this orchestration is also, as Varoufakis points out, politically and humanitarily *irrational*.

De-tribalizing politics?

How, then, might public discourse be de-tribalized and made more politically and more morally rational? The same question is how can we de-moralized public discourse from its virtual tribal polarities of us/good and bad/them which produces a potent herd conformity where any one of ‘us’ who seems in any way to side with ‘them’ is a traitor who must be expelled from our midst? That is, moralized public discourse that is little more than virtue signalling (I’m a good guy, are you a good guy?) is usually at the heart of immoral out-grouping and the anti-liberal silencing of dissent, and is driven by the deep irrationalities of a sub-human herd dynamic.³² This is the opposite or rational and humane political discourse.

As unpacked, atomisation and tribalism are the powerful life-world drivers that are the engines of public discourse now. Along with this is the inchoate and pervasive sense of peril that results from the great speed and complexity of our techno-consumer way of life, and

³² See Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible*, London: Penguin Classics, 2000, for a classic description of deadly and immoral herd moralizing.

its inherent conflict with natural and community continuities.³³ Fear is civically and morally irrational, and we live in a global civic space that is now deeply in the grip of the administration of fear. That is, our way of life is forever ripping up past patterns, customs, social orders and natural ecosystems in order to free individuals up for self-actualization, individually tailored tribal identity-construction, and self-empowerment. This ripping up is so fast and effective now that it is destabilizing the world we live in to such an extent that there are only two ways of dealing with it: head down and peddle faster (hold onto politically irrational business as usual), or leap off now and take the tumble before the inevitable fatal impact.

Addressing the symptoms of orchestrated irrationality

We can treat the symptoms of atomization and tribalism (which we must) but if we do not address causes, the situation will be fatal. The prime symptom of atomized tribalism is a shrill and heavily moralized public discourses defined by highly conformist ‘us’ and ‘them’ categories. This acts in tandem with what Paul Virilio describes as the administration of fear; the State swings into action such that non-conformism to the central ‘us as good guys’ narrative is subject to firm reprisals. The McCarthy era — well before 21st century financial and communications surveillance technologies — showed us how that moralizing conformist dynamic can play out very effectively in the supposedly liberal and democratic ‘free’ world. Resisting the conformism and virtue signalling of this public discourse norm, and insisting

³³ Again, see Paul Virilio, *The Administration of Fear*, Cambridge MA: Semiotext(e), 2007; Paul Virilio, *The Great Accelerator*, Cambridge: Polity, 2012.

on universal humanitarian moral categories, fights back at the symptoms of atomism and tribalism.

We must try to make the civic space and our political institutions work for universal humanitarian moral ends and for a common good that is defined by higher categorize of meaning than ‘our’ herd’s (often strangely framed as ‘national’) interests. But often a Public Relations sleight of hand goes on at precisely this point. In Australia, for example, the ‘humanitarian’ argument for indefinite off-shore detention for would be ‘illegal’ asylum seekers entering Australian waters, is to purge the world of evil people smugglers and to stop boat people drowning.³⁴ In reality, the tribal logic of protecting ‘us’ from ‘them’ was spun as a universal humanitarian argument, which was also conveniently self-congratulatory; we are not evil people smugglers or unscrupulous opportunists and queue jumpers. A winning electoral narrative of self-interest is here clothed in universal humanitarian dress. So now, protecting ourselves from foreign invaders coming from overseas who pose as refugees, who are actually seeking to take advantage of the opportunities and generosities of our nation, and putting our own opportunities and living standards at risk by so doing, is rebranded as saving lives! No-one really believed this obviously false re-branding, but this convenient narrative was bi-laterally and vociferously promote as a sign of how ‘good’ ‘we’ are by both Australian political parties over the course of the 21st century. Rational, hey!

³⁴ This was an entirely spurious and deliberately deceptive narrative. See David Marr and Marian Wilkinson, *Dark Victory*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2004; Robin de Crespigny, *The People Smuggler. The True Story of Ali Al Jenabi*, Melbourne: Random House, 2017; Abbas Nazari, *After The Tampa*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2021.

A very important way of resisting atomistic tribalism and its humanitarian and political irrationality is to not allow false moralisms to proceed unchallenged. Let us be morally honest. Australians — as our actions show — have *no* humanitarian concern for asylum seekers. The complete re-writing of Australian immigration legislation and asylum seeker policies as started by the Howard government with the ‘children overboard’ lies, and as completed by the Minister of Immigration, Mr Scott Morrison MP with the creation of a militarized indefinite off-shore detention arrangement, where real refugees who attempt to arrive in Australia by unauthorized means will never get to come to Australia, is not about universal human rights.³⁵ It is about tribal ‘safety’. It is not a rational moral discourse that we are dealing with here, it is a fear driven, electorally pragmatic, tribal moralism that we are dealing with. This, by any universal moral standards, is immoral.

So much for symptoms; what about causes?

Addressing the causes of orchestrated irrationality

We need to de-atomize and de-(virtual)-tribalize, and re-orient power to civic ends rather than commercial ends. This is a life-world problem. We have to move past surveillance capitalism and techno-feudalism and the contemporary global matrix of financial,

³⁵ Ben Doherty, “Affront to human rights’: top UN official slams Australia’s offshore detention. Michelle Bachelet says hard-line migration policies offer ‘suffering and chaos’ and calls on world to cooperate’. *The Guardian*, 11 September 2018.

<https://www.theguardian.com/law/2018/sep/11/affront-to-human-rights-top-un-official-slams-australias-offshore-detention>

geopolitical, and natural exploitation imperatives that modern consumerism has built. If we don't perform this radical life-world re-configuration, never fear, our life-world will kill itself. But the sooner we recognize that we are embedded in a life-world that is on an inevitable appointment with self-destruction, the better.

At a small scale resistance can be built. If we can re-build functional local communities where real relationships and middle order humanizing structures of common life can be re-built, this addresses atomization. If we can integrate sustainable food production, renewable energy production, and meaningful work into localized functional communities, a two way relationship with the natural world can be reclaimed as well.³⁶ That is, nature is not just a pool of resources, but she is our sister, and we are reliant on her for our sustenance, and also for our meaningful and distinctive place in the world. We must nurture and protect her as much as she provides for us.

If we can recover the village and its human middle-order frames of meaning — if we can recover some sort of *genuine* tribal life — then we will be able to resist commercially driven and relentlessly uprooting atomization, and we will not be drawn to the false tribalism of the mass media and globalist age. In this manner we will be equipped to resist virtual (and false) tribal moralism, and push towards a genuine political rationality, and a universal moral consciousness that does not homogenize local specificities.

³⁶ The Energeia Network project Learning By Doing is seeking to develop such 'bottom up' and community tailored responses to climate change. See here <https://www.energeia.network/learning-by-doing-project>

What we must aim for is a world where the local is the centre of people's lives, and the place of their political empowerment and integration with nature. From here, the global has meaning as an enormously diverse and yet integrated set of freely communicating relations between the human families and natural environments of the world.³⁷ This is the other way up to how we are presently trending. We are trending in a direction where the global is becoming (or has become) the centre of power, and all locals will be MacDonaldized, that is culturally homogenized (via consumerism), and politically dis-empowered (with or without the cooperation of their nation-state governments), so as to preserve the existing commercial and military power structures of a universalized consumer civilization. When we are all totally atomized and there is only one global tribe to whom we all belong, our life-world will have reached its apotheosis. We will also be totally post-political subjects of global tyranny where our overlords use complete techno-surveillance powers to keep us forever in line: Hell on earth. Yet, I think it actually more likely that rather than this life-world ever actually achieving its fulfilment, catastrophic implosion and the destruction of our global civilization will occur. If history is anything to go by, imperial hubris inevitably to reap its own destruction. There are still natural and even metaphysical limits which cannot be simply 'overcome', no matter how powerful and cunning we may think we are.

³⁷ Paul Kingsnorth, *One No, Many Yeses*, London: Free Press, 2003.

In conclusion

Atomization and tribalism have been orchestrated, and have flourished under the conditions of our prevailing global consumer imperium. This is an imperium which is an alliance between US global military power and the trans-national world of enormous Corporations, Communications/Surveillance entities, Military entities, and Financial entities, who have flourished under the post-war world order that US power has upheld. This imperium has orchestrated the political irrationality than now defines our globally advancing Western public discourse. The immoral and anti-liberal-democratic trajectories of atomized virtual tribalism and its virtue signalling must be resisted in the name of keeping what remains politically alive — though it is on the point of death — within the civic life of Western liberal democracies.

Addressing the cause of orchestrated irrationality requires more than seeking to revive that which is on the point of death, it requires a willingness to pursue radical life-world change. We must try and rebuild localized ways of life that have strong middle-order human structures of meaning and relational responsibility in place, and that centre real power around those small communities. But this sort of genuine tribalism needs to uphold a universal frame of moral rationality that transcends the reductively self-interested interests of my tribe. These small communities need to foster networks of genuine politics aiming at high reason. What makes us human — and I think Aristotle is simply correct about this — is our ability to use speech to structure power, such that high visions of Justice and Goodness, rather than low categories of merely animal self-interest (with apologies to non-human animals) guides our political lives.

The assembly of citizens should be an assembly of genuine equals who are all equipped to seek truth, and truth falls out of the dialogue of truth seekers, never in a final way, but in a functionally imperfect way overshadowed by transcendent truths that we can never fully master. If we do not attempt to invert the power structures and value frameworks of our contemporary global consumer civilization, we may bring down upon our own heads the most horrifying dystopia the world has yet seen, or the most cataclysmic destruction of an imperium the world has yet seen. Let us hope, and work towards, the triumph of political reason and universal goodness over the orchestrated irrationality of the sub-human hubristic power of surveillance capitalism and techno-feudalism within the global imperium of consumer culture.

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