

The Saturn-Pluto Cycle

by Bill Herbst

*Version 1.4 (posted on 19 June 2018)
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Of the ten outer-planet cycles that comprise the core of what I call "Civilizational Astrology," the two that are most extreme are Uranus-Pluto and Saturn-Pluto. The current activation of the Uranus-Pluto cycle has been the dominant symbolic factor in astrology for collective humanity during the 2010s. As the effective period (2007-2020) of that disruptive phase change approaches conclusion, next up in the symbolic queue of the ever-changing archetype field is a new Saturn-Pluto cycle, which will take the baton from Uranus-Pluto and reveal a characteristic tone for the early 2020s.

Neither of these cycles is warm and fuzzy. Both include in their symbolism the expression in culture of raw, primal power (Pluto), which can be transformative or restrictive. Among the most obvious differences between the two cycles are that Uranus-Pluto is revolutionary, while Saturn-Pluto is reactionary. Uranus-Pluto challenges the status quo; Saturn-Pluto consolidates the existing order.

The effective period of the next Saturn-Pluto cycle's beginning is a little more than two years, from December 2018 through January 2021. Practically speaking, that's right around the corner.

The Saturn-Pluto cycle is about the use of coercive force by authority, sometimes with the approval of the public. It connects to the authoritarian, repressive, and often violent impulses in human nature. The cycle is characterized not by hope or optimism, but is rather a defensive response to fearful expectations, a kind of striking out in self-protection against perceived threats (both real and imagined). The emphasis is on definite, black-and-white responses to our shared fears about reality. There is no gray zone here, no relativity, and no subtlety. Instead, absolutes tend to predominate.

The cycle is polarizing. When the public is fragmented into extreme tribalism, conflict is inevitable. If the Saturn-Pluto cycle is active during such times, the conflicts are not easily resolved, since those who disagree tend to be unyielding in their beliefs. Cooperation and compromise are rejected in favor of total victory, with an approach of giving no quarter, taking no prisoners, and insisting on unconditional surrender.

Sounds bad, doesn't it?

On the positive side, accentuated Saturn-Pluto periods indicate courage or perseverance during extreme hardship or against seemingly insurmountable odds, as well as moral or emotional staunchness, the strength to hold the line against negative or destructive forces. Power can be used for good or ill; during Saturn-Pluto periods, both are likely.

Because of the elliptical orbit of Pluto, the Saturn-Pluto cycle varies in length from 31-38 years, with quarterly phase changes that occur roughly every 8-9 years. Below is a list of the Saturn-Pluto cycles since the early 20th century, with the effective periods of the four phase changes within each cycle:

World Wars I and II

New Phase	Jun 1914 – Apr 1916
1st Quarter Phase	Oct 1921 – Oct 1923
Full Phase	Feb 1930 – Dec 1932
Last Quarter Phase	Mar 1939 – Mar 1941

The Cold War

New Phase	Aug 1946 – Aug 1948
1st Quarter Phase	Dec 1954 – Oct 1957
Full Phase	Apr 1964 – Feb 1967
Last Quarter Phase	May 1973 – May 1975

Terrorism and Neoliberal Economics

New Phase	Oct 1981 – Dec 1983
1st Quarter Phase	Feb 1992 – Jan 1995
Full Phase	Aug 2000 – May 2003
Last Quarter Phase	Nov 2008 – Aug 2011

New Governments and Stark Options

New Phase	Dec 2018 – Jan 2021
1st Quarter Phase	Apr 2028 – Mar 2030
Full Phase	Jul 2035 – Aug 2037
Last Quarter Phase	Nov 2043 – Oct 2045

The first half of World War I coincided perfectly with the opening phase of the Saturn-Pluto cycle that began in 1914-1916. The Great Depression and the rise of fascism in Europe synchronized with the culmination at the halfway point of that cycle. Then, at the last quarter phase change, World War II erupted.

The Cold War began as the next Saturn-Pluto cycle got underway in 1946-1948, while American military escalation of the War in Vietnam ramped up during the culmination in 1964-1967.

The rumblings of global terrorism began with the onset of the next cycle in 1981-1983, along with neoliberal economics in America and England. The timing of the halfway culmination, when Saturn opposed Pluto in 2001, coincided with the attacks of 9-11, followed by America's military invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

The coming Saturn-Pluto cycle officially starts in January 2020 (although the effective period begins a year earlier), when Saturn conjoins Pluto at 23° of the sign Capricorn. The last time a Saturn-Pluto cycle began in Capricorn was 500 years ago in 1518, as European colonization of the western hemisphere began. Considered from the perspective of civilization, Capricorn is about commerce, economics, the institutional structures of society, and the power of hierarchical authority, especially government.

Jupiter will also be in Capricorn at that point and will conjoin Pluto three times — in April, June, and November 2020 — before moving on to meet Saturn in the first degree of Aquarius in December 2020, marking the beginning of the next 20-year Jupiter-Saturn cycle. This triple-planet alignment increases the symbolic potency, especially so since it presages the unprecedented event in 2022 of a Pluto return in the July 4th, 1776 chart of America.

I find it impossible to imagine that any astrologer familiar with these cycles could possibly feel optimistic about American politics, government, economics, and, by extension, the global economy. Symbolically, this particular constellation of astrological factors that are coming around the bend is akin to seeing the inevitability of a train wreck that's about to happen. The ultimate outcome might be positive in forcing much-needed changes in industrial commerce, finance, and the way humanity lives on this planet, but the process is downright frightening. The medical image that comes to mind is radiation and chemotherapy as treatments for cancer. The neoliberal version of capitalism now firmly in place, where life is reduced to the competitive pursuit of monetary gain, is a cancer that's eating our souls. The "cure," however, is poisonous. Can we eradicate the life-threatening disease without killing the patient?

Any of numerous factors, singly or in combination, could cause an economic derailment. Dystopian doomsday scenarios aren't required. Something like a cyber-attack or other breakdown in the electrical power grid might be sufficient to bring the American economy to its knees. My concern, though, is not the cause or even the severity of economic disruption, but our reaction to it. If something does happen — which is not guaranteed, of course, but Saturn-Pluto implies a high possibility of hitting some sort of brick wall in 2019 or 2020, I worry that our fearful reaction may be more extreme than the event itself.

Despite their paradoxical nature, security and freedom are high on the list of human priorities. To truly experience either in a positive and satisfying way, we need at least some of the other. They are necessary complements. When fear enters the picture, however, both suffer. After the trauma of 9/11 during the last Saturn-Pluto opposition, liberties were sacrificed as the Patriot Act was rammed through Congress. In the name of security, government power and authority increased dramatically, and the public went along with it.

That's the Saturn-Pluto symbolism in a nutshell. Something happens, people get scared, and they contract into a defensive shell, which then typically turns aggressive. A Saturn-Pluto cycle that starts in Capricorn implies that whatever happens will affect the economy. That's what causes the fear. Our reaction, however — the defensive contraction and subsequent outbursts of repressive power — will come from politics and government.

Not only will government tend to overreact, but authoritarian attitudes within the public are likely to become more pronounced. Even if nothing bad happens, the indications in the zeitgeist of people hunkering down into defensive mode are strong. Astrologically, the years immediately ahead aren't a time of optimism, nor of reason and thoughtful deliberation. Instead, our reptilian brains will almost certainly call the shots through instinctive and emotional reactions provoked by fear of loss, a kind of raw survivalism.

As I've written often, perhaps confrontations with harshness, whether through external circumstances or within ourselves, are simply required to bring humanity to the point where we move beyond the Us/Them tribalism that is at the root of so many of our troubles. That logic seems twisted to me, but it's clear that human beings tend not to change until we have to. So, maybe there's a silver lining here after all.

The upshot is that, considered solely from the perspective of astrology, America is not likely to become a kinder, gentler nation as the 2010s give way to the 2020s. For movie buffs (or those of us old enough to remember the Oscar-winner for Best Picture of 1950), what's coming harkens back to Bette Davis' famous line from **All About Eve**:

"Fasten your seatbelts. It's going to be a bumpy night."