

Topsy-Turvy

by Bill Herbst

*Version 1.2 (posted on 15 March 2022)
© 2022 by the author, all rights reserved*

The world has always been, to one degree or another, topsy-turvy. Now, however, we are witnessing a tidal wave of topsy-turvyism. Whether and to what extent a given person will be engulfed by this wave depends, of course, on where we're standing, but even those of us not in the direct path or who have retreated to higher ground are likely to notice some of the effects.

Things are becoming the opposite of what they say they are. By "things," I mean all sorts of different social currents and impacts — from thoughts and opinions to reported news and official statements of presumed facts. All too often, these expressions are upside down, pretending to be something they're not. While this is hardly a new phenomenon, it's happening to an extent that is, quite frankly, alarming to anyone paying attention to what's going on in the world.

Much more often than in the past, lies masquerade as truth. Presumed care is tinged with strange, hidden disdain. Sincerity is frequently a mask for hypocrisy. Apparent inclusion ends up promoting division. Social justice, arguably a worthy motivation and positive social influence, has devolved into woke-ness, which is the antithesis. Liberalism — which for a long time carried the banner of tolerance of differences, diversity, and concern for others — now increasingly approves of authoritarian intolerance and forced compliance, while traditional conservatism — long with a certain hard-edged, fuck-you mentality — now sometimes embraces a more humane, caring consideration. Comrades and enemies can no longer be reliably distinguished by their uniforms.

Sometimes, the topsy-turviness is less a flipping over into contradiction than it is just pushing so far to the extreme in one direction that the previous labels no longer apply. All too frequently, Democrats have morphed into being the Republicans of old, while many Republicans have galloped so far to the right that they've fallen off the end of the scale into nightmarish caricature.

Some of this has emerged over the past two years from the pandemic. Even though we continue to gradually discover a mounting body of evidence that damn near everything we were told by authorities about Sars CoV-2 and how to deal with COVID 19 were half-truths at best and outright lies at worst, many of the various authoritarian policies and draconian practices put in place,

especially since last year, remain in force. Vaccine mandates are still a reality, and many people continue to be denied access to all sorts of social experiences, from eating at restaurants to getting jobs to receiving justified social services or even medical treatment. Those whose reticence or refusal to be vaccinated (or to submit to an additional vaccine booster jab) turned out to be not merely accurate, but eerily prescient and arguably justified, are still too often tarred with the epithets of “selfishness” and “lack of concern for others.”

Governmental and media reaction to the Russian invasion of Ukraine are a clusterfuck of propaganda narratives and often outright falsehoods. This is an undeniable tragedy, but one whose roots extend back a long, long way with serious and sobering implications for all the major players in the melodrama — Russia, Ukraine, the U.S., and Europe. In geopolitical terms, no one is clean or innocent. Complicity and blame fill every nook and cranny. Decision after decision led to this.

In America, our society has become a cruel and absurdist joke. Education is a shambles, medicine is failing, mainstream media has lost all but the crudest resemblance to journalism, social media is perpetual road rage, finance is totally corrupt, the environmental movement has been completely co-opted by Big Money, so-called Green Energy is anything but green, and even the most modest efforts toward global disarmament are just a dim memory of times past.

That short list is just a few of the myriad modern examples of the kind of things that happen when empires overreach, decline, and die. One significant difference between earlier empires throughout the history of civilization and those of the modern world (America in particular) is that the breakdowns of coherent order that previously took centuries or even millennia now take mere decades to occur.

America’s “fall from grace” (I use that term very, very loosely, with a certain wry sarcasm) has occurred entirely over my lifetime of seven decades. When I was born two months before the halfway mark of the 20th century, America was the reigning empire of the world. In almost every way imaginable — by example, via policy, through arm-twisting, economic coercion, and outright force — America built the civilization most of the planet lives in today. As the 2020s unfold, however, this country clings to power with an ever-tightening but extremely precarious grip. At this point, each succeeding year brings another slip, and with each slip we slide joltingly a little further toward the abyss. America’s not done yet, of course, but I seriously doubt that it will take another 50 years for the U.S. to come apart at the seams.

For the past two decades, I’ve written about civilizational collapse, but I haven’t had a very clear picture of what that would look like. I’m seeing now, at least a little to my surprise, that the phenomenon of topsy-turvy — of things becoming their opposites — is one of the manifestations of collapse. This is a subtle form of chaos, where life continues with much of the appearance of normalcy, but

where meaningful content is replaced by empty form. However unexpected that may be to me, the upshot is increasing perversity — a twistedness that lies just under the surface.

Commerce and business continue, although in many ways with accelerating urgency — a kind of quiet hysteria (although it's becoming not-so-quiet) — as if we'd better buy and sell absolutely everything right now, today, since no one knows what tomorrow may bring. There's a reason why Amazon is the giant behemoth of retail.

Where we are is a bit like those Warner Bros. Looney Tunes Road Runner cartoons (which are, oddly enough, exactly the same age I am), where the Road Runner has tricked Wile E. Coyote to chase him to the edge of a cliff, which is progressively falling away as Coyote realizes that he's been fooled again — despite whatever Rube Goldberg Acme device he's employed to try to catch the Road Runner — so he scrambles backwards to keep from falling into the mile-deep canyon. We know what always happens in the cartoon. Coyote ends up suspended in space for a second or two, looking forlorn and holding up a sign that says "Whoops!" or "Uh-Oh!" before plummeting down through space in a long, telescoped fall.

In the cartoon, this particular scenario may be only one of a series of Coyote's episodic attempts and failures. He miraculously resurrects himself after the fall and sets out again to catch the Road Runner, but always with a similar result — crashing failure in one form or another. Our fate may be similar, but without the miraculous resurrection.

In the meantime, hardly anything means what it once did. Orwellian double-think rules the day. Everything is inverted, flipped over, turned upside-down, head over heels, or just plain belly up.

Welcome to Topsy-Turvy World, where nothing is what it purports to be.