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Panic has always been a valuable political resource, but 2020 was the year our ruling class perfected the art of harvesting it, renewing it, and refining it to weapons-grade purity.

The bitter irony is that one reason panic became so easy for politicians and grifters to sow and reap is the great collapse in confidence caused by their own incompetence and greed over the past few decades. The political class found a way to profit from its own ineptitude.

If public confidence in government and major institutions had not been so thoroughly shaken by years of rampant corruption and incredibly expensive failures, perhaps the public would not have been panicked so easily - and profitably! - when the coronavirus struck.

Even as public confidence collapsed and paranoia grew, social media came along to make our society more twitchy and neurotic. We argue constantly about the spread of "disinformation," but not enough about how social media rewards irrationality and performative emotionalism.

Panic and social media both nourish the human herd instinct, and herds respond to loud noises, not reasonable arguments. Our society was panicking over far less important and dangerous things before Covid-19 arrived. We were panicking over some bizarre social issue every week.

And then a political/media culture with decades of practice at causing stampedes and directing the herd found itself with a truly dangerous virus to exploit. They're using it to completely overhaul society at a cost measured in trillions. Panic politics went nuclear.

Politics in the Western world has largely become the dark art of tricking and bullying people out of measuring costs against benefits. A great deal of what our political class has done to us would have been impossible if the public had been given realistic costs to consider.

There are two basic political strategies: make the cost of your agenda seem negligible, so that only selfish and wicked people would resist, or make the benefits seem so important that questions about the cost can be dismissed as outrageous. Covid panic supports both strategies.

Frightened people are easily tricked and bullied out of asking whether a particular agenda is too expensive, or whether the benefits truly outweigh the costs. We've become a society positively addicted to fear and panic. Covid was our first hit of black tar heroin.

Panic has a way of reconciling the desire of people to be seen as smart, independent, and liberated with their deep desire to belong to a herd. It's the secret sauce that lets people posture as deep thinkers while sinking into mindless conformity. It's a hell of a drug.

And because we don't know who we can trust - we know big institutions are inept and corrupt but we've also been taught to hate and fear each other - we've become prone to panic. We crave the adrenaline rush, and we WANT to believe there are Smart Solutions out there somewhere.

Our political and media class really likes the way we are right now - fearful and divided, herding and looking for leadership signals, desperate for "solutions" to everything from Covid to race relations at any cost. They'll do what they can to keep us this way. /end