

By Richard Eckersley

# *The West's Deepening Cultural Crisis*

Growing crime rates, increasing drug problems, rampant violence, and widespread depressive illness are all signs of Western culture's deepening crisis.

A striking feature of Western civilization is that, for all our success in reducing the toll of lives taken by disease, we have failed to diminish that exacted by despair. According to the World Health Organization, suicide has steadily increased for both males and females in the developed world since the early 1950s.

What makes the trend particularly tragic is that the increase in suicide is occurring mainly among teenagers and young adults, especially males. In several countries, including the United States, Australia, and New Zealand, the suicide rate among young males has more than tripled since 1950.

We have also seen a dramatic deterioration in many indicators of the psychological well-being of youth over this period:

- Authorities and experts worldwide admit the war against illicit drugs is being lost, despite the expenditure of billions of dollars on law enforcement and education programs. Alcohol abuse among the young has become a major problem.

- There is a growing body of research suggesting that major depressive illness is becoming more

*Gin Lane* (1750-51) by William Hogarth depicts drunkenness, poverty, and "distress even to madness and death," in Hogarth's words. Some 250 years later, the West's despair is deeper, as seen in artist Tom Chalkley's contemporary take on *Gin Lane*, opposite.

widespread in Western societies, especially among teenagers and young adults.

- Obsessive dieting has become

ENGRAVINGS BY HOGARTH, EDITED BY SEAN SHESGREEN (DOVER, 1973)



commonplace among teenage girls, and the incidence of eating disorders is rising. Recent U.S. research indicates that the incidence of anorexia



TOM CHALKLEY

nervosa among girls aged 10 to 19 has increased more than fivefold since the 1950s.

- Rates of crime, mainly an activity of teenage youths and young men, have risen sharply in most, if not all, Western societies since World War II, after a long decline from the high levels of the early 1800s.

The social reality reflected by these statistics is evident in any large Western city. One writer described a walk that he and his wife took through Sydney to “enjoy” the sights of the city:

We didn't. It was as if William Hogarth's *Gin Lane* stretched for blocks. The streets were littered with drunks, some vomiting where they stood. The footpaths outside the hotels were strewn with broken glass. People argued with and hurled abuse at one another. Others with vacant eyes stood mumbling soundlessly to themselves, arms whirling like aimless windmills. Through the streets surged packs of feral teenagers with brutish faces and foul, mindless mouths.

The reference to Hogarth's famous eighteenth-century engraving is apt: Then, the social upheaval and destruction of jobs during the Industrial Revolution, together with a booming population, produced soaring drunkenness, child abuse, and crime.

If the problems I have mentioned were limited to a small fraction of the population, while the vast majority of people were enjoying a richer and fuller life than ever before because of the changes that have taken place in recent decades—and I am not denying that there have been many positive changes—then we could conceivably argue that the problems are a price worth paying.

Yet, this is clearly not the case. Some of the problems, such as mental illness and eating disorders, are now affecting a significant proportion of the population of Western nations. The impact of increasing crime reaches far beyond the victims and perpetrators, tainting all our lives with fear and suspicion and limiting our freedom. Furthermore, surveys of public attitudes show these problems are just the tip of an iceberg of disillusion, discontent, and disaffection.



### A Breakdown in Values

The modern scourges of Western civilization, such as youth suicide, drug abuse, and crime, are usually explained in personal, social, and economic terms: unemployment, poverty, child abuse, family breakdown, and so on. And yet my own and other research suggests the trends appear to be, at least to some extent, independent of such factors. They seem to reflect something more fundamental in the nature of Western societies.

I believe this “something” is a profound and growing failure of Western culture—a failure to provide a sense of meaning, belonging, and purpose in our lives, as well as a framework of values. People need to have something to believe in and live for, to feel they are part of a community and a valued member of society, and to have a sense of spiritual fulfillment—that is, a sense of relatedness and connectedness to the world and the universe in which they exist.

The young are most vulnerable to peculiar hazards of our times. They face the difficult metamorphosis from child into adult, deciding who they are and what they believe, and accepting responsibility for their own lives. Yet, modern Western culture offers no firm guidance, no coherent or consistent world view, and no clear moral structure to help them make this transition.

The cultural failing may be more apparent in the “new” Western societies such as the United States,

Canada, Australia, and New Zealand than in other Western societies because they are young, heterogeneous nations, without a long, shared cultural heritage or a strong sense of identity, and hence something to anchor them in these turbulent times. Older societies may offer a sense of permanence and continuity that can be very reassuring.

Interestingly, youth suicide rates have not risen in countries such as Spain and Italy, where traditional family and religious ties remain strong. And in Japan, despite the persistent myth of high levels of youth suicide, the rates have plummeted since the 1960s to be among the lowest in the industrial world.

The United States, the pacesetter of the Western world, shows many signs of a society under immense strain, even falling apart. Recent reports and surveys reveal a nation that is confused, divided, and scared. America is said to be suffering its worst crisis of confidence in 30 years and to be coming unglued culturally—the once-successful ethnic melting pot that the United States represented now coagulating into a lumpy mix of minorities and other groups who share few if any common values and beliefs. Most Americans, one survey found, no longer know right from wrong, and most believe there are no national heroes.

Although the symptoms may not be as dramatic, Australians are suffering a similar malaise. Surveys suggest a people who, beneath a professed personal optimism, nonchalance, and hedonism, are fearful, pessimistic, bewildered, cynical, and insecure; who feel destabilized and powerless in the face of accelerating cultural, economic, and technological change; and who are deeply alienated from the country's major institutions, especially government.

### Children's Views of the Future

The most chilling of such surveys, in their bleakness, are the studies of how children and adolescents in Western nations see the future of the world. To cite just one example, *The Sydney Morning Herald* in 1990 conducted a survey in which about 120 eleven-year-old Sydney schoolchildren were asked to write down their

perceptions of Australia's future and how their country would fare in the new millennium. The idea was to publish a cheerful view of Australia's future. The newspaper chose bright, healthy youngsters, young enough to be untarnished by cynicism, yet this is what the *Herald* said of the results:

Yes, we expected a little economic pessimism, some gloom about the environment and job prospects and perhaps even a continuing fear of nuclear war. But nothing prepared us for the depth of the children's fear of the future, their despair about the state of our planet and their bleak predictions for their own nation, Australia.

In any other culture, at any other time, children this age would be having stories told to them that would help them to construct a world view, a cultural context, to define who they are and what they believe—a context that would give them a positive, confident outlook on life, or at least the fortitude to endure what life held in store for them.

Our children are not hearing these stories.

It may be, then, that the greatest wrong we are doing to our children is not the fractured families or the scarcity of jobs (damaging though these are), but the creation of a culture that gives them little more than themselves to believe in—and no cause for hope or optimism.

At the social level, this absence of faith grievously weakens community cohesion; at the level of the individual, it undermines our resilience, our capacity to cope with the more personal difficulties and hardships of everyday life.

We can see clearly the consequences for indigenous people, such as American Indians, Innuits (Eskimos), and Australian Aborigines, when their culture is undermined by sustained contact with Western industrial society: the social apathy, the high incidence of suicide, crime, and drug abuse. We are seeing all these things increase among youth in Western societies. Other young people—the majority—may be coping and outwardly happy, but they often suggest a cynicism, hesitancy, and social passivity that reveal their uncertainty and confusion.



In making the individual the focus of Western culture, it seems we have only succeeded in making the individual feel more impotent and insecure. Not surprisingly, the more we feel diminished as individuals, the more insistently we stand up for our rights—producing, as commentators such as Robert Hughes have said of America, a nation of victims, a society pervaded by a culture of complaint.

The evidence strongly suggests that, robbed of a broader meaning to our lives, we have entered an era of often pathological self-preoccupation: with our looks, careers, sex lives, personal development, health and fitness, our children, and so on. Alternatively, the desperate search for meaning and belonging ends in the total subjugation of the self—in, for example, fanatical nationalism and religious fundamentalism. The suicidal deaths earlier this year of more than 80 followers of the Branch Davidian cult in the siege of its Waco, Texas, compound—like the Jonestown massacre in Guyana in 1978—have provided sad evidence of this social sickness.

The harm that modern Western culture is doing to our psychic well-being provides reason enough to forge a new system of values and beliefs. However, the need is made even more critical by the relationship between modern Western culture and the many other serious problems that Western societies face: the seemingly intractable economic difficulties, the widening social gulf, the worsening

environmental degradation.

Fundamentally, these are problems of culture, of beliefs, and of moral priorities, not of economics. Furthermore, addressing these problems will require good management; good management requires clarity and strength of purpose and direction. How can we know what to do if we don't know what we believe in and where we want to go?

### The Sources of Cultural Decay

There is a range of possible sources of the cultural decay of the West, all linked to the domination of our way of life by science.

The first source is the way science has changed the way we see ourselves and our place in the world through its objective, rational, analytical, quantitative, reductionist focus. Science, its critics say, has caused the crisis of meaning in Western culture by separating fact from value and destroying the "magic" and "enchantment" that gave a spiritual texture to our lives.

A second is the accelerating rate and nature of the changes driven by the growth in science and technology since World War II. These changes have torn us from our past and from the cultural heritage that provided the moral framework to our lives. Science undermined our faith in "God, King, and Country" by replacing it with faith in "progress": the belief that the life of each individual would always continue to get better—wealthier, healthier, safer, more comfortable, more exciting.

A third source, then, is the collapse of this belief as the limits and costs of progress become ever more apparent: Economic, social, and environmental problems pile up around us; expectations are raised, but remain unmet. We are now failing even by the standard measure of progress: For the first time in many generations, today's youth cannot assume that their material standard of living will be higher than their parents'.

A fourth source of our cultural malaise is one specific set of products of our scientific and technological virtuosity—the mass media. The media have become the most-powerful determinants of our culture, yet

we make little attempt to control or direct the media in our best long-term interests. Indeed, the style of public culture dictated by the popular media virtually guarantees that we will fail to address effectively the many serious problems we have.

For all their value and power as instruments of mass education and entertainment, the media:

- Fail to project a coherent and internally consistent world view.
- Divide rather than unite us, fashioning public debate into a battle waged between extremes—a delineation of conflict rather than a search for consensus.
- Heighten our anxieties and intimidate us by depicting the world outside our personal experience as one of turmoil, exploitation, and violence.
- Debase our values and fuel our dissatisfaction by promoting a superficial, materialistic, self-centered, and self-indulgent lifestyle—a way of life that is beyond the reach of a growing number of citizens.
- Erode our sense of self-worth and promote a sense of inadequacy by constantly confronting us with images of lives more powerful, more beautiful, more successful, more exciting.

Science and technology may not be the sole source of the cultural flaws that mar Western civilization. But they have certainly magnified cultural weaknesses to the point where they now threaten our culture—just as, for example, the October 1987 stock-market crash was caused, in the words of one analyst, by “the emotions that drive a trader, magnified a millionfold by the technology at his disposal.”

### Creating a More Harmonious Society

If those who see science as intrinsically hostile to human psychic well-being are right, then we could be in for the mother of upheavals as Western civilization falls apart. But I believe that the problem rests more with our immaturity in using a cultural tool as powerful as science, and I remain hopeful that, with growing experience and wisdom, we can create a more benign and complete culture, and so a more equitable and harmonious society.

Aldous Huxley once said that if he



had rewritten *Brave New World*—with its vision of a scientifically controlled society in which babies were grown in bottles, free will was abolished by methodical conditioning, and regular doses of chemically induced happiness made servitude tolerable—he would have included a sane alternative, a society in which “science and technology would be used as though, like the Sabbath, they had been made for man, not (as at present and still more so in the *Brave New World*) as though man were to be adapted and enslaved to them.”

Paradoxically, given its role in creating the situation we are in, science can, I believe, provide the impetus for the changes that are required, both through the knowledge it is providing about the human predicament and also, perhaps, through its increasing compatibility with spiritual beliefs.

Having inspired the overemphasis on the individual and the material, science is now leading us back to a world view that pays closer attention to the communal and the spiritual by revealing the extent of our interrelationship and interdependence with the world around us. This is evident in the “spiritual” dimensions of current cosmology, with its suggestion that the emergence of consciousness or mind is written into the laws of nature; in the primary role science has played—through its discovery and elucidation of global warming, ozone depletion, and other global environmental problems—in the

“greening” of public consciousness and political agendas in recent years; and in the part that scientists (such as David Suzuki and David Maybury-Lewis) are playing in validating to Westerners the holistic and spiritually rich world view of indigenous peoples.

But science, in effecting change, must itself be changed. While remaining intellectually rigorous, science must become intellectually less arrogant, culturally better integrated, and politically more influential. Science must become more tolerant of other views of reality, other ways of seeing the world. It must become more involved in the processes of public culture. And it must contribute more to setting political agendas.

Arguably, only science is powerful enough to persuade us to redirect its power—to convince us of the seriousness of our situation, to strengthen our resolve to do something about it, and to guide what we do. Science can be the main (but by no means the only) source of knowledge and understanding that we need to remake our culture.

So I am not pessimistic about our prospects, despite the grim trends. Nor do I underestimate the immensity of the challenge. I sometimes do feel, in contemplating what is happening, that we are in the grip of powerful historical currents whose origins go back centuries, perhaps millennia, and against which individuals and even governments can only struggle punily.

Yet, it is also true that people, collectively and individually, can stand against those currents—and even change their course. □



#### About the Author

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*Editor's note: We'd like your views on the West's despair. See the Futurist Poll on page 49.*