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## **What the !#&\* have values got to do with anything! Young people, youth culture and well-being**

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**Richard Eckersley**

Several years ago, in the summer of 1996-97, I was caught up in a passionate debate about obscenity in rock music lyrics. It began with an article I wrote for *The Australian* in which I argued that the extreme violence and obscenity in some rock music was perhaps - I was fairly tentative about this - one of the many ways in which the mass media were contributing to the creation of a culture of disillusion and demoralisation.

While I focused on one aspect of youth culture – rock music (which itself embraces several sub-cultures) – my purpose was to explore popular culture in general, some of its defining characteristics, and its impact on young people. In essence, my argument is that beneath the swirls and eddies of youth cultures runs the mainstream of modern Western culture; that this mainstream culture powerfully shapes youth culture and strongly influences young people; and that core elements of this culture threaten our well-being, especially that of young people, at both the personal and social level.

This is the story published in *The Australian* on 9 December 1996:

### **NO SURRENDER TO ROCK OF RAGES**

**Parents often feel they are waging an undeclared war against the media for influence over their children's development.**

My 10-year-old son got into trouble at school recently for telling another boy, in a heated exchange, to go suck a mate's cock. The boy reported him, he was put on detention for a week and the school rang my wife. Head bowed, my son explained to me that evening that he had wanted the other boy, who had said the same thing to him before, to know what it felt like to have someone say that to you.

The other week I heard on Triple J a song by Regurgitator that goes, "I've sucked a lot of cock to get where I am". I commented on it to my 16-year-old daughter. "It's figurative, dad," she said with a smile.

Did she find it offensive, I asked. No, because it wasn't said seriously, she replied, but there were some lyrics she didn't like, mentioning Nine Inch Nails. I asked her later to give me an example. This is a line from one of their songs: "I want to fuck you like an animal".

Nine Inch Nails' lyrics featured in a stormy meeting last year in New York between executives of Time Warner, the world's largest media company, and William J Bennett, co-director of the

conservative advocacy organisation, Empower America, and his liberal ally, C DeLores Tucker, the chair of the National Political Congress of Black Women.

According to *The New Yorker* magazine, when the history of the fracas over media violence in the US is written, the meeting will be seen as pivotal. Tucker handed around copies of the lyrics of a song by Nine Inch Nails and asked Michael Fuchs, chairman of the Warner Music Group, to read them aloud. (At the time Warner Music half-owned the Interscope label on which Nine Inch Nails records.) Tucker asked three times and each time Fuchs refused. One of the Empower America delegates then obliged. This, in part, is what he read:

“Got me a big old dick and I/ I like to have fun/ held against your forehead/ I’ll make you suck it/ maybe I’ll put a hole in your head/ you know, just for the fuck of it/ I can reduce you if I want.”

My first reaction on reading this was of surprise and dismay that this sort of stuff gets airplay. I remembered a youth researcher telling me several years ago that parents would be outraged if they knew the lyrics of some of the songs their children listened to. Then I thought, well, you get this language in any number of films or books these days; how is this any different?

Maybe there is no difference, and maybe it doesn’t matter. The bad language seems to run off the kids like water off a duck’s back. *I recall a support group for Pearl Jam during their tour last year - the Meanies, I think it was - screaming in one of their numbers, ‘suck my cock, suck my cock’. If people reacted at all, they just laughed. A quarter of a century ago, at the Wallacia pop festival near Sydney, I heard a vocalist or two spatter their songs with the odd f-word, and I don’t think it left me morally impaired.\**

There is a powerful temptation just to accept the moral ambiguity and ambivalence of society’s attitudes to obscenity (and to so much else) as part and parcel of the postmodern world we live in. My son, presumably, is learning to make some sense of a moral code which says that what is unacceptable at school and home is somehow okay in public broadcasting.

But maybe we shouldn’t yield to this temptation too readily. Maybe there are real costs - and important differences between film, literature and music. First there is a question of access. Any child can tune in to Triple J (or any other radio station that plays this type of rock). Film guidelines may not mean much these days, but they do give parents the chance to control the films their children see.

But a more important difference concerns the context of the language. In film and literature, the obscenity is (mostly) part of a fictional narrative; it is easier to separate it morally from our personal lives and behaviour. This distinction may be harder to make in the case of music because it forms a more diffuse and integral part of our life, especially that of young people.

Obscenity encourages disrespect and disregard for others. It is usually used in abuse, often to add emphasis and menace to what is being said. As the Nine Inch Nails’ lyrics show, the line between obscenity and violence is often very fine.

After the Time Warner meeting, Bennett wrote to the corporation’s chairman and CEO, Gerald Levin (who had walked out of the meeting): “My recommendation is fairly straightforward. Time Warner should stop its involvement with and support of gross, violent, offensive and misogynistic lyrics. Anything short of that is, I think, an abdication of corporate responsibility.”

Bennett and Tucker are continuing their campaign. They say Time Warner sold its stake in Interscope after months of intense public pressure. But they claimed this year that Time Warner - along with other major corporations such as Sony, PolyGram, EMI and BMG - were still marketing “vile and vicious music”.

I have singled out rock music because it is often overlooked in the debate about the media and their impact, which has focused on television violence. It also demonstrates the extent to which our society now accepts the commercialisation and commodification of just about everything, from the most depraved act to the most intimate, from the most sublime joy to the most appalling suffering.

Permitted in the name of freedom of artistic expression, this cultural debasement is driven by the pursuit of profit. Its costs include a pervasive and corrosive cynicism, pessimism and alienation, especially among the young.

Like many parents and teachers, I suspect, I often feel I am waging an undeclared war against the media for influence over my children’s development. Where we fight, I think we mostly win. But many adults have surrendered, worn out by the relentlessness of the struggle, the media’s power, the many other demands on their time and energy, and their own moral confusion.

It should not be this way.

*\* Italicised section edited out in the published version.*

## **The debate**

In a lengthy discussion on local ABC radio the day this article appeared, Toby Cresswell, editor of the youth magazine, *Juice*, said I was a boring old fart tut-tutting about a bit of harmless rebellion by young people: just another re-run of the eternal conflict played out between conservative old fogies and spirited youth.

I posted the piece on YARN, the youth affairs research network on the Internet, and invited comment. Many supported my position (most privately). But I also came under strong attack from some who stressed the importance of freedom of speech and artistic expression, the relative nature of values, the virtues of cultural pluralism and diversity, and the legitimacy of youthful protest. A couple noted that obscene and misogynistic lyrics have been part of commercial rock music for decades, so what was new?

My arch-protagonist was Barney Langford, then the artistic director of the 2 Til 5 Youth Theatre in Newcastle, NSW, with whom I’ve also clashed in the pages of *Youth Studies Australia* (Eckersley 1995). So while quite a few participated in the ‘public’ debate and many more in private messages to me and, presumably, to Barney and the others, for the sake of clarity and simplicity I’ll use the exchanges between Barney and me to explore the issues raised. My main focus is on the question of cultural pluralism and moral relativism.

Barney argued that my article was “the latest in a long list of paranoid reactions to rock music and its influence upon young people”. He showed a good knowledge of rock history, and gave valid examples of past instances where adults worried about the impact

of rock music on children and of the difficulty in deciding where to draw the line between what is considered acceptable and what is not.

Here's how Barney put it: "Obscenity is relative. I find the treatment meted out to the Lost Generation and their families and the ideology which underpinned it obscene. Similarly I find the recent upsurge in bigotry and racial intolerance obscene, as is the Prime Minister's capitalising upon that bigotry and intolerance. I even find the overtly jingoistic and exploitative sentimentality of 'I still call Australia home' an obscenity, and the proliferation of golden arches is an obscenity I encounter on a daily basis. But that's me. Each person's response is different. Obscenity, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. And this is fine until one person's or a small group's subjective idea of obscenity is imposed on the rest of us. Who draws the line between political/social comment and obscenity?... You see what we're seeing here is not a challenge to moral values, but an affront to an individual's aesthetic values. What is perceived as obscenity in the form of JJJ and Nine Inch Nails is just another set of aesthetic values; no better or worse than the aesthetic values held by a whole range of individuals and groups who inhabit this wide brown land of ours. They're just different. It's one of the major dividends which we get from having a diverse society."

In my reply, I said: "If Barney believes this - if each person's response reflects 'just another set of aesthetic values' that is 'no better or worse' than someone else's - why criticise the PM for doing nothing about Pauline Hanson's remarks? Why attack my point of view, especially with such outrage that I should express it? He implies I am attempting to impose my 'subjective idea of obscenity' on the rest of you. Isn't he doing the same in criticising it? Aren't Nine Inch Nails, Time Warner and Triple J imposing on us a subjective idea of what is obscene (or not obscene)? Isn't our society defined by an imposed and dominant set of values that promotes rampant individualism, materialism and consumerism? Sets of values cannot be insulated and isolated from each other; they interact, compete. That's what a dynamic society is.

"My set of aesthetic values allows me to try to persuade others of my point of view. Barney, on the other hand, betrays his in attacking mine because he believes one set is no better or worse than another. If we believe this, on what basis do we seek to change things, to right what we perceive to be wrong? If we believe this, why discuss anything, do anything? How do we avoid political and moral stagnation?"

"This postmodern relativism and ambivalence is very different from Voltaire's famous comment that while he might disagree with another's views, he would defend to the death the other's right to express them. Voltaire is not arguing, as Barney is, that one viewpoint is no better or worse than another. Voltaire is advocating free and vigorous debate; the relativism expressed by Barney (and some of the others) makes debate pointless.

"This is a very important point. If all sets of values are regarded as valid, then there is no discipline on people to examine critically their own position and justify it. In fact, if everything becomes just a matter of personal opinion, why bother having an opinion?"

Let's take a more extreme example to highlight the problem with this approach. Do we tolerate the Bosnian and Rwandan genocide or the Holocaust as simply reflecting another 'set of aesthetic values'? No. We base our condemnation on the evidence of the harm and suffering those values have caused others. Likewise, we have to decide, as a society, whether or not the values that are expressed in some rock music, and in the media in general, are harming us.

"The decision here is much harder than in the case of genocide. Uncertainties, ambiguities and trade-offs abound. Things are not cut and dry, black and white. Plurality and diversity do enrich our culture. It's true we now accept, even appreciate, what once outraged us. But the tests of personal and social benefits and costs must still be applied, and decisions made. And I believe there is growing evidence of the costs of some features of today's mass media. Psychological harm is as real as physical harm to individuals, and perhaps more dangerous to societies because it can be more insidious and pervasive."

Several other points Barney made underscored the differences in our perspectives on cultural issues. He said we need to focus on the "real problems" such as "ensuring that each young person has access to a meaningful and relevant education and, at its conclusion, is assured of a job". I replied: "Yes, these are real problems (about which I've also written over the years); but they are not the only problems young people face. It is a fallacy of Western thinking that the only 'real' things are those that have tangible, physical dimensions. Qualities such as hope, meaning, belonging and identity (which the *Juice* editor dismissed as airy-fairy nonsense spouted by strategic analysts and sociologists) are real; their lack or distortion causes real problems. These qualities are significantly shaped by our culture (as well as by tangibles such as having a job or a family), and our culture is significantly influenced by the mass media."

Barney also said that, "it is in the nature of young people to experiment, to confront, to challenge and outrage adult sensibilities. That's what makes being a young person so exciting, so interesting." I replied: "If we accept this view of youth, then surely we adults have to play our part, and be confronted, challenged and even outraged. I note this not just to point out another contradiction in Barney's response. Young people need to know where the boundaries are so they can decide what to accept and what to challenge. Our increasing failure as a society to mark those boundaries denies them crucial support and guidance in the passage to adulthood and maturity."

Another point made by Barney and several others was that my arguments were based on a false premise that young people were cultural sponges, passively and uncritically absorbing cultural messages. This issue of 'agency' has an important status in youth studies. Nothing I said was intended to imply that young people were, as Barney put it, "merely pawns in the hands of marketers". In a later post, I said: "Of course, an individual's relationship with his or her social and cultural environment is complex and multifaceted. But we are all creatures of our culture; it shapes our values, beliefs, identity and where we find meaning in our lives. I'm not surprised that survey after survey

reveals such widespread individualism, materialism, cynicism, mistrust etc because these are exactly the attitudes you would expect given the nature of modern Western culture.”

Barney had the last say in this debate, in a posting some six weeks after my initial message. I didn't respond then, but will here. Although Barney characterised my counter-arguments as little more than quibbling over semantics – “I was adamant that I was not going to follow up my first posting and take part in a tit for tat tomato/tomarto/potato-potarto argument over the ether”- he nonetheless wrote at great length. On the issue of what are the ‘real’ problems, he represented my position as asserting that “one needs to concentrate upon the spiritual in preference to the material well-being of young people”. “Surely”, he said, “the cumulative effects of an education system irrelevant to many young people’s needs and chronic youth unemployment are major contributors to the alienation and dispossession felt by many young people. Surely we need to remedy the causes of this alienation rather than concentrating on the symptoms.” This misrepresents what I actually said (see above), which was that there were cultural as well as social *sources* of youth problems.

On the issue of young people’s right to confront and challenge, Barney said all my posts implied that this should be on my terms, not theirs. He missed my point, which was that in a culture where ‘anything goes’ and everything is tolerated, nothing can be confronting and challenging. This returns us to the core issue of moral relativism. Barney wrote: “Richard...goes on to suggest that I tolerate racism and sexism....I must admit to some bemusement when I read this. Just because one tolerates a person holding an opinion doesn't mean that one condones that opinion. Phillip Adams, for example, supports the lifting of the ban on David Irving (the controversial British historian of the Holocaust) entering Australia. Yet he vehemently opposes Irving’s views. There is a difference between tolerance of a person’s right to a view and the acceptance of that point of view.

“...Richard argues that, as a relativist, I will disappear up my own relativities and won't stand for anything to the point where ‘debate in general becomes pointless’. Surely there is an inherent contradiction here. We are engaging in this debate. I assume it is meaningful for Richard and I wouldn't be engaging in it if it weren't for me. Either: we are engaging in this debate which is meaningful, ergo I am not a relativist; or I am a relativist and we are engaging in a meaningful debate, ergo it is possible to be a relativist and have a strong position. You can't have it both ways.”

In fact, it is Barney who is attempting to have it both ways, and it is his position that is inherently contradictory. His position here is not consistent with his earlier view that one set of values is no better or worse than another, that they are just different. In adopting the very point I was making about Voltaire, he has, wittingly or unwittingly, abandoned the centre-piece of his earlier argument.

### **Culture and well-being**

Cultural relativism taken to the extreme represented by Barney’s initial position is as wrong-headed as the other extreme - attempting to impose a single, uniform set of values

on everyone - and, paradoxically, achieves a similar, dangerous result. The cultural authoritarian suppresses debate; the cultural relativist makes debate pointless. We often appear to assume there are only the two options, ignoring the rich ground between them. It is important we have the right to express different points of view, but when we argue that all points of view are equally valid and, by implication, that all should be allowed to prevail, then we have seriously lost the plot.

Both extremes undermine meaning because they devalue values and beliefs, which define how we relate to each other and the society and world in which we live. 'Personalised' values become another means by which the individual and his or her 'rights' are elevated above all other considerations. And they become another means by which the individual, inadvertently, becomes estranged from others, cocooned in personal opinions that need no external validation or justification.

In investing so much meaning in the individual 'self', we have left it dangerously exposed and isolated because we have weakened or lost the enduring personal, social and spiritual relationships that sustain us and give deeper meaning and purpose to our lives. Instead, our personal expectations rise ever higher - and often beyond reach - and even when attained, often fail to satisfy. In this and other ways, modern Western culture is failing to provide an adequate framework of hope, belonging, meaning and moral values in our lives, so weakening social cohesion and personal resilience. Among the consequences are low thresholds of boredom, emptiness, even despair - moods we hold at bay through the pursuit of distraction. It is no accident or surprise that consumerism thrives in such a culture.

Of course, this cultural condition does not affect everyone equally. For example, as I noted in the rock lyrics piece, where parents and teachers fought against the influence of the mass media, they mostly won. The costs of modern Western culture are particularly evident among young people. They are most at risk because they are at that stage of life where they are confronting the questions whose answers culture powerfully influences: Who am I? What do I believe? Where do I belong? What is the purpose of my life?

The suicide rate for males aged 15-24 has more than tripled over the past 50 years, and among females in this age group it has about doubled (although it does not show the sustained increase seen in the male rate). These trends are despite the lower lethality of suicide attempts, especially those involving poisoning (the method favoured by females, who attempt suicide more often than males) because of safer pharmaceutical drugs and improved intensive-care technologies. In most older age groups, suicide rates have fallen over about the past 30 years. In other words, changes in youth suicide rates are more likely to *under-estimate* than *over-estimate* changes in suicidal behaviour in young people.

Although suicide remains a very rare event, new research is revealing the extent to which it is just the tip of the iceberg of suffering among young people. The research shows that this pain is not an aberrant personal response to life; nor is it confined to marginalised or disadvantaged young people. While less than 0.02% of young people take their own lives

each year, recent studies show that a fifth to a third of young people today experience significant psychological distress or disturbance.

A study of Australians' mental health and well-being, published in 1998, found that those aged 18-24 had the highest prevalence of mental disorders during the 12 months prior to the survey – 27% - with prevalence declining with age to 6% among those 65 and over. The survey covered anxiety disorders, affective disorders (such as depression) and substance-use disorders. The study notes that because the survey did not cover all forms of mental health problems, it may underestimate the extent of mental disorder in Australia.

A recent study of university undergraduates found almost two thirds admitted to varying degrees of suicidal ideation (thoughts) or behaviour in the previous 12 months. Thus 21% revealed minimum ideation, agreeing they had felt that 'life just isn't worth living', or that 'life is so bad I feel like giving up'. Another 19% revealed high ideation, agreeing they had wished 'my life would end', or that they had been 'thinking of ways to kill myself'. A further 15% showed suicide-related behaviour, saying they had told someone 'I want to kill myself', or had 'come close to taking my own life'. Finally, 7% said they had 'made attempts to kill myself'.

Another study of Year 8 students (13-14-years-old) found over 40% felt that they did not have anyone who knew them very well – that is, who understood how they thought or felt. Almost a quarter said they had no-one to talk to if they were upset, no-one they could trust and no-one to depend on. These students were 2-3 times more likely to experience symptoms of depression than those who had someone who knew them well and whom they could trust and depend on.

A similar situation exists in other Western nations. A major international review of time trends in psychosocial disorders in young people concludes there has been a “surprising and troubling” rise in these disorders since World War II in nearly all developed countries (Rutter and Smith 1995). The disorders include crime, drug abuse, depression, suicide and suicidal behaviour (only with eating disorders do the authors say the evidence is inconclusive, although many researchers believe that these, too, have become more common).

The review says that, to a large extent, finding causal explanations of the increases “remains a project for the future”. However, it rejects several popular explanations for the trends, such as social disadvantage and inequality, and unemployment (although these can be associated with disorder at an individual level). More likely explanations are: family conflict and breakup; increased expectations and individualism; and changes in adolescent transitions (in particular, the emergence of a youth culture that isolates young people from adults and increases peer group influence, more tension between dependence and autonomy, and more relationship breakdowns).

In assessing the well-being of young people in the United States, the final report of a 10-year study says: “Altogether, nearly half of American adolescents are at high or

moderate risk of seriously damaging their life chances. The damage may be near term and vivid, or it may be delayed, like a time bomb set in youth” (Carnegie Council 1995). The report says social and technological changes this century - including more divorces and single-parent families, the erosion of neighbourhood networks, high unemployment and greater media and peer influence - mean adolescents can lack “two crucial prerequisites” for healthy growth and development: “a close relationship with a dependable adult and the perception of meaningful opportunities in mainstream society”.

In my own work, I have argued, as already noted, that the situation also reflects a growing failure of modern Western culture to fulfil the purposes of culture: to provide a rich mesh of stories, beliefs and values that holds a society together, allows individuals to make sense of their lives and sustains them through the trouble and strife of mortal existence.

The broader, sociocultural perspectives suggest that while tragedies such as suicide arise from intensely personal circumstances, they also represent the extreme end of a spectrum of responses by many young people to modern life. These range through degrees of depression, drug abuse, delinquency and suicidal ideation etc to a pervasive sense of alienation, disillusion and demoralisation (traits more likely to be expressed in passivity than through anger or anti-social behaviour).

Surveys of youth attitudes suggest many young people are mistrustful, cynical and fatalistic; wary of commitment; outwardly confident but inwardly insecure; alienated and disconnected from society. They believe that life should be fast and fun; they are on their own; options should be kept open; governments are incapable of solving our problems; and they themselves are powerless to change things.

The 1996 international ‘Teenmood’ survey (I’m grateful to Mojo Australia, a member of the Mind and Mood consortium which undertook the study, for lending me a CD-ROM about it) reveals a global teen generation characterised by four moods: alienated, cynical, experimental and savvy. Of the first two moods, the study says: “Changes in traditional structures and values have resulted in global teen alienation from family and society....Deep cynicism is the global teens’ main defence against a lack of benchmarks, role models or credible authority. They don’t trust adults; they don’t trust the government; and (they) suspect that everyone has their own agenda.”

Today’s teens, it observes, expect little or nothing from the future. Of Australian teens, the study says in part: “(they) are not excited about much in life....(they) express a lack of direction....a sense of boredom exists because they feel there is not much to do or much they can afford....they’re uncertain and apprehensive about the future....they feel life is harder and more competitive than in their parents’ day.”

In a similar vein, the Australian Commission for the Future found in a 1996 study that young people believed Australian society lacked leadership, vision, clear morals or values, and had become a spiritual vacuum. The study also notes: “Youth seem unusually apathetic about the future. They are not negligent or ignorant of the

challenges; they just feel powerless to do anything about it. It is a sense of being disenfranchised and disengaged, awaiting the outcome of events rather than anticipating a role in them.”

The Australian Catholic Bishops’ 1998 final report on its three-year consultation, *Young people and the future*, warns of “a malaise which is denying young people hope” (Australian Catholic Bishops’ Conference 1998). “That malaise, though difficult to isolate and describe precisely, can best be described as a crisis of identity and meaning.” It continues: “The danger to young people is not themselves, but the culture in which people live today. This largely nihilistic culture, dominant with negativity and images of rancour, hedonism and rage, has submerged the virtues of faith, hope and love.”

Many people tend to be sceptical of such findings, believing them to be too pessimistic. It is true other studies of young people’s attitudes have produced more positive findings. Some of the differences and contradictions can be explained; others require further research. I have argued elsewhere that we can distinguish between three different images of modern youth, each of which reflects different aspects, or depths, of their lives and relationships (Eckersley 1997):

- The *postmodern* portrait represents young people as the first global generation, attuned to the postmodern world: confident, optimistic, well-informed and educated, technologically sophisticated. They are self-reliant (even self-contained), street-wise, enterprising and creative, fast on their feet, keeping their options open. This portrait tends to be promoted by a technology- and media-driven consumer culture that the image helps to sustain.
- The *modern* portrait suggests most young people successfully negotiate the transitions of adolescence to become well-adjusted adults. Most cherish their families, enjoy life and are confident they personally will get what they want out of it - a good job, travel, a partner and eventually a family of their own. This portrait focuses on young people’s more personal and immediate domains.
- The *transformational* portrait (so called because of the social transformation it suggests is required) reveals young people as understandably cynical, alienated, pessimistic, disillusioned and disengaged. Many are confused and angry, uncertain of what the future holds and what society expects of them. While they may continue to work within ‘the system’, they no longer believe in it, or are willing to serve it. This portrait reflects broader social and deeper psychological perspectives.

I want to stress several other important points to clarify these issues:

- I am deliberately focusing on the problem areas in young people’s lives. Most young people may appear well-adjusted, happy and optimistic about their own personal futures. However, the size of the minority that isn’t, its growth, and the prevalence of the social negativity that undercuts young people’s energy, enthusiasm and dreams all point to a serious situation that we must address more effectively than we are.

- Many of these issues are not all that obvious unless you specifically probe for them (eg, cynicism about 'the system', the pessimism about social futures); even something as extreme as a suicide attempt will usually remain hidden from all but the immediate family and perhaps a few intimate friends.
- The psychological pressures and costs appear to occur mainly after young people leave the relative security and structured life of home and school to make their own way in the world (eg, male suicide is almost non-existent under 15, but climbs steeply from 15 through to the mid 20s).

### **Five 'isms' of modern Western culture**

Well-being is linked to the quality of our relationships (personal, social and spiritual), a sense of meaning and purpose (or agency) and hope, among other things. Values are important because they define our relationships and shape our identities, beliefs and goals. Values guide how we best get along with each other and manage our affairs. So, ultimately, they also impact on issues such as education, employment and social justice.

In the above discussion I have touched on, and moved between, several characteristics of modern Western culture. I have argued these are eroding the requirements for well-being. In this section, I want to tease them apart. They include: economism, consumerism, postmodernism, pessimism and individualism. These features, which are all inter-related to a greater or lesser degree, are reshaping our values, and so impacting on our well-being, both personal and social.

*Economism:* Economics is amoral - that is, it is not concerned with the morality of the choices consumers make to maximise their 'utility', or personal satisfaction. The more economics dictate our choices, individually and as a society, (which is what I mean by economism) the more marginalised moral considerations become. The market may be an effective way of deciding how something is done, but not what is done and why.

*Consumerism:* Most if not all societies have tended to reinforce values that emphasise social obligations and self-restraint and discourage values that promote self-indulgence and anti-social behaviour. For example, according to the 13th Century theologian, St Thomas Aquinas, the seven deadly sins are pride (self-centredness), envy, avarice, wrath, gluttony, sloth and lust; the seven cardinal virtues are faith, hope, charity, prudence, temperance, fortitude and religion. Consumerism effectively reverses these lists, making the vices virtues and vice versa. Think for moment about how much consumption, which drives the economy, is located within the vices, and how much within the virtues. We cannot quarantine other aspects of life, including those most important to well-being, from the moral consequences of the economic requirement for ever-increasing consumption.

*Postmodernism:* Postmodernity, or late modernity, describes a world coming to terms with its limitations, including the end of the modern dream of creating a perfect social

order through the rational instruments of science, technology and bureaucracy. It is world characterised by relativism, pluralism, ambivalence, ambiguity, transience, fragmentation and contingency. Its danger is an 'anything goes' morality, a belief that values are just a matter of personal opinion, and that one set of values is no better or worse than another. Values cease to require any external validation, or to have any authority or reference beyond the individual and the moment. 'Personalised' values become another aspect of moral marginalisation and individual isolation.

*Pessimism:* While most people are personally optimistic, they are socially pessimistic. That is, we are hopeful about our own personal futures, but concerned about the future of society or humanity. Once people give up on the dream of creating a better world, then everything changes, the whole dynamic of the society shifts. It affects, perhaps subtly and indirectly, people's attitudes to just about every aspect of their lives – personal relationships, education, work, citizenship – once again increasing the risks of 'distancing' the individual from society.

*Individualism:* Under the influence of these cultural shifts, the meaning of individualism has changed. Increasingly, it is being expressed as self-centredness, the gratification of personal wants, a pre-occupation with entitlements, an abrogation of responsibilities and a withering of collective effort. This style of individualism is destructive to both personal and social well-being.

The point about these five cultural traits is that they each have, or can have, positive dimensions. Individualism, as an acknowledgement of human dignity and the rights to freedom, self-determination and political participation, has been a powerful force for good in human history. The inalienable right to 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness' is at the core of modern democracy. The loosening of social constraints and obligations can enhance personal freedom and creativity, and bring a greater social vitality, diversity and tolerance. Consumerism has made our lives more comfortable. Pessimism can be an incentive to change.

Yet taken too far, and expressed as material indulgence and moral licence, rather than social and political engagement, these cultural trends deliver, not liberation, but a new enslavement. In particular, they threaten democracy because our political power comes from a sense of collective, not individual, agency - from pursuing a common vision based on shared values, not maximising individual 'utility'.

And it seems to me that in recent times, we have reached the point where the cultural negatives are reinforcing each other, and we now lack the necessary balances – as people are recognising. Thus, far from acting as a cultural counter-weight to economism and consumerism, the moral ambiguity of postmodernism and the loss of faith in a better world strengthen the celebration of the individual and the gratification of personal needs and wants that are never sated because new ones are always being created.

The cultural flaws may be as much perceived as real. For example, the mass media give an exaggerated impression of the extent of the decay, which then risks becoming self-

fulfilling. The distorted image of society that we see reflected in the mirror of the mass media is too often of a mire of selfishness, sleaze and greed that ordinary, decent people have to struggle to escape, or are naïve to resist. We become increasingly cynical, mistrustful, pessimistic – leading to a sense of isolation or alienation from society, especially those aspects that are outside our personal experience.

Even with these cultural developments, we still see a mix of benefits and costs, gains and losses. In some respects we have improved as a society: we have become better educated, more tolerant and aware, less sexist and racist. While we can legitimately talk about progress (or regress) as a ‘net’ effect, there is no single stream of social change, and different streams can flow at different speeds. Some of the contemporary improvements may be the result of social and political processes that began long ago and reflected different values. And it may be that we are yet to experience the full costs of what we see happening today: the creation of a society in which growing numbers of individuals are disaffected and social institutions are increasingly seen as a source of disappointment.

The Australian human ecologist, Stephen Boyden, has listed the universal psychosocial conditions of life that are conducive to health and well-being. They include an environment and lifestyle that provide a sense of personal involvement, purpose, belonging, responsibility, interest, excitement, challenge, satisfaction, comradeship and love, enjoyment, confidence and security. For more and more people modern life no longer offers these qualities.

## **Conclusion**

The images of the world and ourselves that we see reflected in our culture - including, and perhaps especially, in the mass media - are of profound significance to us. They shape who we are and what we become. Those images should reflect important realities, but they should also reveal of what we are capable. They must combine realism and idealism, inspire as well as educate and entertain. They should never be so bleak that they demoralise and discourage us. Images of ourselves that dwell on human vices and failings ultimately destroy us.

The British sociologist, Zygmunt Bauman, has put this well in his book, *Life in Fragments: Essays in Postmodern Morality*: “...if what we think about each other reflects what we are, it is also true that what we are is itself a reflection of what we believe ourselves to be; the image we hold of each other and of all of us together has the uncanny ability to self-corroborate. People treated like wolves tend by and large to behave in a wolf-like fashion; people treated with trust tend on the whole to become trustworthy. What we think of each other does matter.”

I don't know which factors contribute most to our culture of disillusion and meaninglessness. It may be that television is more important than rock music or youth literature (another area in which I have debated these issues); that fiction is less important than depictions of ‘real life’; and that the media's promotion of a superficial, materialistic and self-centred lifestyle does more harm than media violence. It may also be, as I

suggested in *The Australian* article, that music provides a context to obscenity and violence different from film and literature. But any factor, taken in isolation, is easy to dismiss as insignificant relative to everything else. Taken together, however, they constitute a powerful, ubiquitous and often destructive influence.

Critics of this perspective sometimes give the impression that the greatest – even only – cultural hazard is to limit freedom of expression, that cultural content itself does little or no harm. If we accept this, then we must also believe that it does little or no good, that it is a marginal part of our lives. This is surely wrong. Culture shapes society and profoundly influences our lives. It has the capacity to do great good – or great harm. To say this is not necessarily to call for stricter censorship; I think the issue is far too subtle and complex for such a crude tool. But the media and other cultural forces – especially those directed at young people – should be subject to vigorous discussion about their roles and consequences – both good and bad - and that discussion reflected in media content.

As a society we must take responsibility for these consequences, and strive to ensure that the balance favours the positive. The risks of our failure to do this are a continuing cultural degradation, or a backlash that seeks the imposition of harsh and excessive control. Either outcome threatens young people and their well-being.

### *Postscript*

(1) A year after the debate on rock lyrics, I saw in a newsagency the *1997 Juice Yearbook*. It included Toby Creswell's tribute to Michael Hutchence, in which he tells of how the "heroic optimism" of INXS and Michael's "belief that by taking action things would get better" had helped him through a deep crisis in his own life. Quoting the lyric of one of their songs, he says: "...I heard in its delivery a man whispering hope, promising that there would be excitement, pain, surprises, and adventure down the track, and that no matter how hopeless and desperate it seemed, life was worth living."

I wrote to Toby saying that it seemed to me that this was exactly the point I was making, but from the opposite perspective: the ability of various media to do harm. "If you allow that their messages can inspire hope and purpose," I said, "you have to concede they can also infect with despair and disillusion. The media are not the only factor here, of course, but they are important. With that importance comes a responsibility I think the media all too often neglect." I never had a reply.

(2) The director of the Australian Institute of Criminology, Dr Adam Graycar, recently argued that encouraging civil behaviour would help to prevent crime. Reflecting a growing interest in civility among criminologists, Graycar argued that incivility (including swearing) could turn into disorderly behaviour which, in turn, could develop into criminal behaviour. A recent report for the National Campaign Against Violence and Crime (1998) also notes that the concept of 'incivility' – a perceived breakdown in an 'acceptable' quality of environment and 'polite' interaction between people who do not know each other – is central to the fear of crime. The report states that young people

are more fearful of crime than has been recognised, and are particularly afraid of other groups of young people.

(3) During the period of writing and revising this paper, I heard that the Beastie Boys had criticised The Prodigy over their song, 'Smack my bitch up', because it incited violence against women, and had also refused to perform in Australia with Marilyn Manson, the arch-exponent of shock rock, renown for his gross on-stage antics.

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