



# Whatever to Western

## The Cultural Crisis, 20 Years Later

*In 1993, THE FUTURIST published author Richard Eckersley's provocative essay, "The West's Deepening Cultural Crisis." Here, he looks back at what has happened since, and forward to what the next 20 years might hold.*

**F**or a while, things were looking up.

Twenty years ago, I argued that Western culture was in crisis, marked by increasing pessimism about the future and declining well-being, especially among youth. Other serious problems we faced—the intractable economic difficulties, widening social gulf, and worsening environmental degradation—were also fundamentally problems of culture, of beliefs and moral priorities.

Readers responded strongly, and mostly positively, to the essay. In a poll run by THE FUTURIST, 84% agreed that Western culture was failing to provide a sense of meaning, belonging, and purpose, and a framework of values; 63% said most people in Western nations were pessimistic about the future; 57% agreed

that excessive individualism was a problem in Western cultures.

The 1990s seemed to offer new hope. The dot-com and biotech booms were heralded as the beginning of an era of unlimited and sustainable economic growth and prosperity. Several of the adverse trends in young people's well-being began to improve in countries like the United States, where the declines had been most pronounced. Climate change made it onto the political agenda, nationally and internationally.

Then things changed again. Events such as 9/11 and other terrorist attacks, the West's waging of protracted and unpopular wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the rise of the East, notably China, to challenge the West's economic and political supremacy all contributed. Then the

global financial crisis struck in 2008. "Declinology" has now become a new theme in public debate and discussion about Western civilization.

Beneath the economic and political ebb and flow over the past two decades, the West's cultural crisis never really went away. Throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s, surveys continued to reveal public disquiet about "the frenzied, excessive quality of life today" (as a 1995 American survey put it). And this crisis had an increasingly tangible outcome as new research revealed more about the extent and seriousness of youth health problems.

"Culture" isn't simply about groups having distinctive costumes, songs, dances, or prayers. Culture brings order and meaning to our lives. Of all species, we alone require

# What Happened to Civilization?



By Richard Eckersley



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a culture to give us reasons to live, to address the fundamental questions of life: Who am I? Where have I come from? Why am I here? There are many cultural paths we can follow; this is the source of our extraordinary diversity and versatility. But it is also a danger: We can lose our way.

## Deepening Pessimism

In 1993, I said of the United States that reports and surveys revealed a nation that was confused, divided, and scared, suffering its worst crisis of confidence in 30 years. The same was true of other Western countries, including my own, Australia. Today, the situation is arguably worse. In 2011, *Time* magazine reported a poll showing that the United States is going through “one of its longest sustained periods of unhappiness and pessimism ever,” adding that it is “hard to overstate what a fundamental change this represents.”

Two-thirds of Americans (68%) believed that the past decade was one of decline, not progress, for the

United States and that the greatest threat to its long-term stability came from within, not from outside, the country (66%). About half said that the past decade was one of the worst in the past 100 years (47%) and that American children today would be worse off when they grew up (52%) than people were now. In a 2006 European survey, 60% said that, for most people in their country, life was getting worse.

Australia ranks at or near the top of many international comparisons of quality of life and development. Unlike the United States and Europe, it escaped the global financial crisis relatively unscathed: There was no recession, unemployment didn't rise, and national debt is manageable. A refrain in public debate is that Australians have nothing to whine about. Yet, the public mood in Australia is sour; dissatisfaction with government is high. In a 2009 survey, only 24% of people said quality of life in Australia was getting better. In another 2009 survey, Australians generally saw themselves as being

richer, but unhappier (or no happier), than they were in the previous few decades. While 77% said Australians' material standard of living was higher than 20 years ago, 58% felt that emotional well-being was lower. As one market researcher put it, people see the world as a glass half empty, although they are determined to see their personal lives as a glass half full.

In contrast to people's high levels of personal happiness and life satisfaction, many studies over the past few decades have revealed their anger and anxiety about the changes in Western societies. The concerns include excessive greed and selfishness, consumerism, too much competition and too little compassion, the loss of community, growing pressures on families, and drugs, crime, and violence. There is a common perception that, with individual freedom and material abundance, people don't seem to know “where to stop,” or now have “too much of a good thing.”

So the pessimistic mood goes far deeper than politics and the perfor-

mance of governments, although people may not fully grasp the reasons for their disquiet. The disenchantment is systemic, reflecting the reality that the social trajectory of our health and well-being—of our quality of life—is now downwards (setting aside the offsetting benefits of medical advances and other specific interventions).

## Declining Youth Well-Being

In the 1993 article, I looked especially at the health of young people, who reflect best the tenor and tempo of the times because they are growing up in them. Furthermore, their attitudes, lifestyle choices, and illnesses will affect their health in later years, so shaping the health of the entire population.

I pointed to the rising rates among youth in many Western nations of suicide, drug and alcohol abuse, depression and other mental health problems, and crime. The next decade showed improvements in at least some measures, including suicide and crime; an American composite index of child and youth well-being, which had been falling since its starting point in 1975, began to rise from 1995. Public commentary about Gen Y (aka, the millennials) has been generally more positive than it was about their predecessors, Gen X.

However, experts believe that the war against drugs is still being lost. The United States is experiencing an epidemic of prescription-drug abuse, which is now driving a sustained rise in drug-related deaths. Heavy drinking remains a concern, and alcohol- and drug-related public violence is a serious problem in many Western countries. More importantly, we now have a much better understanding of the extent of the decline in young people's health and well-being over several generations, and of its causes.

Rising rates of diabetes and other health risks associated with increasing obesity have led to predictions that, barring new medical treatments, the life expectancy of today's

youth will fall. More disturbing are the trends in mental health, which accounts for by far the biggest share of the "burden of disease" in young people (measured as disability-adjusted life years, or lost years of healthy life). Although the trends remain contested among researchers, the weight of evidence suggests a marked decline in psychological well-being.

One American study, comparing the results of a widely used psychological test going back to the 1930s, found a steady decline in the mental health of college students between 1938 and 2007: Five times as many college students now score high enough on the test to indicate psy-



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chological problems, compared with 1938. And a large survey of American college freshmen found that their emotional health had fallen in 2010 to the lowest level since the survey began in 1985.

A British study found that adolescents experienced considerably higher rates of emotional problems in 2006 than they did in 1986. The greatest changes were for worry, irritability, fatigue, sleep disturbance, panic, and feeling worn out or under strain; the more severe the reported symptoms, the larger the increase over the two decades.

Recent results of national surveys conducted by the American College Health Association show that large proportions of students report strong negative emotions. In the 2011 survey, more than 80% had, in the

previous 12 months, felt exhausted and overwhelmed by all they had to do; 30%–60% had felt very lonely, very sad, overwhelming anxiety or anger, that things were hopeless, or so depressed that it was difficult to function. From 10% to more than 50% had experienced these emotions in the previous two weeks.

Exactly what the findings mean for young people's health and well-being is not clear. They are certainly not the whole story. Had they been asked, 80%–90% of the students would have said they were happy and satisfied with their lives; most would be leading seemingly normal lives, attending lectures, completing assignments, working, partying, and dating. At the same time, these findings reveal something about being young today, and about the pressures young people face.

At the societal level, changes in the family, work, education, the mass and social media, religion, governance, and environmental pollution all play a role in this decline in health and well-being. At a more personal level, there are the changes in diet, outdoor play, the experience of nature, physical activity, sleep, peer relations, drug and alcohol use, and sexual activity. A particular concern today is the sexualization and commodification of childhood, as children are pressured at an ever younger age to be popular, look good, do well, and follow the latest consumer fashions and fads.

Linked to these trends are more intangible changes associated with increasing materialism and individualism. Both are defining characteristics of modern Western culture; both have conferred benefits to people, including to their health and well-being. However, both are now exacting rising costs to well-being.

These costs include a heightened sense of risk, uncertainty, and insecurity; a lack of clear frames of reference; a rise in personal expectations, coupled with a perception that the onus of success lies with the individual, despite the continuing importance of social position; an excess of freedom and choice, which is experienced as a threat or tyranny; the con-

strual of the self as independent and separate from others; and a shift from intrinsic to extrinsic values and goals.

These cultural shifts toward excessive materialism and individualism are not just a matter of greater vanity, selfishness, and greed (although many people express concerns about these traits), or simply the manufactured desire to “have more stuff.” They lead to an unrelenting pressure to focus on what we make of our lives, to fashion identity and meaning increasingly from personal attributes, achievements, possessions, and lifestyles, and less from shared cultural traditions and beliefs.

This emphasis is a recipe for disappointment, depression, and anxiety. It distracts people from what is most important to well-being: the quality of their relationships with each other and the world, which, ideally, contribute to a deep and enduring sense of intrinsic worth and existential security. Asked what he

had learned from a long-running study of the lives of a group of over 260 Harvard students in the 1930s, psychiatrist George Vaillant replied, “That the only thing that really matters in life are your relationships to other people.”

Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman argues that social ills have their source in today’s “individualized society of consumers,” with consuming more being the “sole road to inclusion,” and “existential uncertainty” now a universal human condition. A new study of Finnish students’ fears for the future gives intriguing insight into these more abstract aspects of well-being, including the role of the fear of death (see box below).

Health and well-being are more than just a consequence of changing social conditions. They are an important, and underestimated, dynamic in society, affecting our resilience and how we respond to social changes and challenges.

## The Mismeasure of Progress

The past decade or so has seen a remarkable surge in interest in measuring the progress of societies (“Is Life Really Getting Better?” *THE FUTURIST*, January 1999). The debate has focused on adequacy of economic indicators, notably per capita income or GDP, as measures of a nation’s performance, relative to the past and to other countries. Measures of subjective well-being, especially happiness and life satisfaction, are attracting particular attention. Other widely used indicators in comparing nations include health (measured as life expectancy), education, human rights, governance (including political freedom and corruption), and equality.

These indicators place Western liberal democracies at the leading edge of progress, and present them as models for less-developed nations.

## Young People’s Fears for the Future: Less Global, More Personal

A new study in Finland casts fascinating light on changes in young people’s world and well-being (“Fears for the future among Finnish adolescents in 1983-2007,” *Journal of Adolescence*, August 2012). It assessed changes in fears for the future of Finnish youth, based on adolescent health and lifestyle surveys carried out in 1983, 1997, and 2007.

A total of 17,750 students aged 12–18 were asked an open question: “When you think about your life and the future in general, what three things do you fear the most?”

Surprisingly, fear of war and terrorism fell, from 81% in 1983 to 56% in 1997 and 11% in 2007, as did fear of environmental disasters (11%, 31%, 7%). Fear about work and education did not change much (work, 42%, 36%, 40%; education, 11%, 10%, 15%), again surprising given the changes in these domains over the decades.

However, other, more personal fears rose: failure and making wrong choices (7%, 8%, 16%), future family and partnership (7%, 10%, 14%), loneliness (5%, 6%, 20%), accidents (6%, 8%, 12%), health (16%, 34%, 41%), and death (17%, 21%, 39%).

The authors, led by Pirjo Lindfors, conclude that perceptions of risks have become more individualized, thus supporting late-modernist theory. The results highlight the fact that adolescents’

images of the future act as a mirror of the times, reflecting the values and ethos of society and its social and cultural norms and their changes over time.

“Cultural and societal changes, including emphasis on individual choice and increased uncertainty, seem to create perceptions of uneasiness and insecurity in young people’s transitions to adulthood,” the authors write.

The existential dimension of the analysis can be taken further. In psychology, terror management theory argues that fear of our mortality is a powerful motivation for humans, and we construct personal and cultural means to manage it, to allow us to accept the inevitability of death—worldviews, values, beliefs, rituals. So the Finnish findings, showing increased fear of death, might be evidence of how Western culture is failing us.

Existential psychologist Paul Wong says that life is defined by its fragility and finiteness, and death holds the key to authentic living: “To live fully, we need to accept death through meaning-making,” he says. Asked about the Finnish findings, he told me: “I believe that one of the main reasons for an increase in fear of death among young people is the steady decline in people’s interest in developing a philosophy of life or quest for meaning, which will lead to a decline in well-being.”

—Richard Eckersley

For example, Western nations occupied the top 10 positions, and 17 of the top 20, in the 2011 UN Human Development Index, which is based on life expectancy, literacy and educational enrollment, and per capita income.

According to the first UN World Happiness Report, the happiest countries in the world are Denmark, Norway, Finland, and the Netherlands. The story is much the same with most other indices, with the New World countries of Australia, Canada, and New Zealand also doing well. Only when environmental indicators, such as the ecological footprint, are included does this order change significantly.

But even the new and expanded measures are still missing a critical dimension of human well-being: the more intangible, cultural, moral, and existential aspects of life that reflect and reveal the depths of the human psyche and the complexities of human affairs. Replacing or supplementing money with happiness or life satisfaction as a measure won't do the trick. Although well-being research has revealed the importance of things other than money, there remains a substantial gap in the new progress measures, even those incorporating subjective well-being.

Orthodox approaches underestimate the degree to which "progress" as we measure it is contributing to an existential deficit that is affecting the health and well-being of all of us, rich and poor alike. This additional "psychosocial dynamics" perspective is largely absent from the political, and even scientific, debate about progress.

To a significant extent, conventional indicators and models of progress are measuring Westernization or modernization, rather than optimal social progress or development. While the concepts may overlap, they are not the same thing. At best, the qualities being measured may be desirable, even necessary, but are not sufficient. At worst, the benefits of Western culture are being counted, but not its costs, which are formidable and growing (note Finland's position as one of the happiest coun-

tries, while fears about death, health, failure, and loneliness rise among its youth—see box on page 19).

The tension or contradiction is seen clearly with both materialism and individualism. International comparisons suggest that rising material wealth is a national positive (even if it has diminishing benefits); yet, it requires and reinforces a cultural and moral context that promotes materialistic values that are harmful to well-being. Similarly, individual freedom is seen as a major component of progress and development, but freedom, too, comes at a cost when it is pushed too far, and becomes a form of social abandonment or isolation.

## The Case for "Pessimistic Hope"

Twenty years ago, I could still see a positive future for humanity, despite the deepening crisis I described. Today I am more pessimistic. Like an increasing number of scientists, futurists, and others, I now believe it is too late to avoid widespread calamities arising from climate change, resource depletion, and other global developments (see "Global MegaCrisis" by William E. Halal and Michael Marien, *THE FUTURIST*, May-June 2011). I realized about five years ago, with the evidence of accelerating global warming, that we'd left it too late; and we are continuing to leave it too late. As well as being a real threat, climate change is also a symbol of humanity's wider predicament.

I linked the cultural crisis to several effects of science, but also saw science as helping us through it. Only science, I suggested, was 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. Yet, the past few years have seen a remarkable rise in public and political questioning, even rejection, of climate-change science.

I saw hope in a growing compatibility, a reconciliation, between sci-

entific and spiritual views of the world. Instead, we've seen a backlash by scientists and others against the rise of religious fundamentalism, some of it as "fundamentalist" as the religion they denounce. It is "a dialogue of the deaf," says Swiss philosopher Alain de Botton.

Still, I could be wrong. I remember the dire predictions in the 1970s of what lay in store for humanity in the decades that have now passed—without their being fulfilled (although the science behind the predictions was much less developed then). We can only face the future with hope; but for there to be hope, we have to confront reality unflinchingly. Let's call it "pessimistic hope."

Ever since the 1960s, we have declared the next decade to be the decade of reckoning, the time when we must deal with global environmental problems such as climate change, land and water degradation, food security, peak oil, population growth, and biodiversity loss. And as each decade passed without the necessary action being taken, we postponed the deadline another 10 years. With the failure of the 2009 Copenhagen conference on climate change, the 2010s are now the critical decade for action. By the decade's end, the environmental "emergency" will have lasted half a century and spanned two generations. Will we have acted decisively by then?

Indeed, one of the most striking things when we look back over the last 20 years is the resilience of the status quo, the persistence in Western democracies of a politics that, explicitly and implicitly, sees no need to move beyond a worldview of unending material progress, despite the disenchantment of their citizens and the evident failure of material progress to deliver on its promise to keep making life better.

It is not that nothing worthwhile has been achieved; it is that not enough has been achieved with "politics as usual" approaches. This deep current of systemic and sustained political failure remains largely ignored, while politicians, commentators, and analysts focus on the swirling surface eddies of politi-

cal theater and policy detail. If the deeper perspective were more widely recognized and part of public and political debate, there would be more incentive for governments to respond to it.

Fixing this situation goes beyond politics; it requires leadership at all levels of society. But politics has a role to play. Both politicians and the electorates they serve must have the courage to enact sweeping policy changes that shift the course of the deep current, not just stir up the surface eddies.

Making these changes would mean recognizing that economic growth measures progress very imperfectly, that the content of growth is more important than its rate, and that we need to direct economic activity away from private consumption for short-term personal gratification toward long-term public

investment in the social transformation necessary to address all the challenges of our century and to ensure our future.

Radical reforms could include, for example:

- Limiting or banning political donations by corporations and other vested interests.

- Putting a sufficiently high price on carbon and other sources of environmental degradation (some countries have introduced a carbon price).

- Abolishing tax deductibility for advertising to ease the pressures on us to spend and spend.

- Creating jobs where they are socially needed and useful, not where confected demand dictates.

Beyond the policy specifics, however, I believe that we need to change Western culture: the stories, symbols, and metaphors by which

we define ourselves, our lives, and our goals—and so our politics.

The magnitude of this transformation will be akin to that from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment, from the medieval mind to the modern mind. Just as it was impossible for the medieval mind to anticipate the modern, or the modern to imagine itself back into the medieval, so it is impossible for us today to anticipate what might follow the modern mind.

However, the seeds of the Enlightenment were sown in the Middle Ages, including the turmoil of the fourteenth century and the devastation of the Black Death; and so, too, are the seeds of a new consciousness being sown in the chaos of modern times. While the earlier revolution spanned centuries, the advances in education and communication could allow a new cultural revolution to happen in decades.

In *A Distant Mirror* (Knopf, 1978), historian Barbara Tuchman states that Christianity provided “the matrix and law of medieval life, omnipresent, indeed compulsory.” Its insistent principle was that “the life of the spirit and of the afterworld was superior to the here and now, to material life on earth.... The rupture of this principle and its replacement by belief in the worth of the individual and of an active life not necessarily focused on God is, in fact, what created the modern world and ended the Middle Ages.”

This transition produced the great social and political movements of the nineteenth century that shattered many assumptions of what was “normal” at that time: epidemics of infectious disease, child labor, the buying and selling of human life, the oppressed status of women, the appalling working conditions in “dark, Satanic mills.” We now face another rupture or discontinuity in our view of ourselves, in what it is to be human, that will change profoundly how we live (see box, “Redefining the Self”).

There are signs this process has begun, although its direction is not yet established, and it remains largely invisible in politics and public affairs

## Redefining the Self

One specific example of how a cultural redefinition might take place—encouraging self-interested, competitive individualists to become, instead, more altruistic and cooperative—is by changing how we construe the self.

When I was at school we were taught that the atom was made up of solid particles, with electrons whizzing around the nucleus like planets orbiting the sun. Now, we think of the atom as more like a fuzzy cloud of electrical charges. Similarly, we currently think of the self as a discrete, biological being with various needs it seeks to satisfy. Like atoms combining into molecules, we form and dissolve bonds with other separate selves to create and terminate relationships. Sociologists talk of modern society as one of “atomized” individuals.

What if we were to see the self not as a separate physical entity, but as a fuzzy cloud of relational forces and fields? This would be a self of many relationships, inextricably linking us to other people and other things and entities. Some are close and intense, as in a love affair or within families; some are more distant and diffuse, as in a sense of community or place or national or ethnic identity; and some may be more subtle, but still powerful, as in a spiritual connection or a love of nature.

These relationships can wax and wane, vary in intensity and charge (positive or negative). Importantly, they never end—for example, the break-up of a marriage, or the death of a parent or child, does not “end” the relationship, but just changes it.

Transforming how we see the self in this way—as a fuzzy cloud of relationships—would change profoundly how we see our relationships to others and to the world. It would, for example, reduce Western culture’s fear of death, and all that means for well-being. It brings us closer to how indigenous people see the self, and represents one way that scientific and spiritual views can be compatible. It would alter radically our personal choices and our social and political goals.

—Richard Eckersley



## For Further Reading: Richard Eckersley in THE FUTURIST

■ **“The West’s Deepening Cultural Crisis,”** November-December 1993, pp. 8-12.

Growing crime rates, increasing drug problems, rampant violence, and widespread depressive illness are all signs of Western culture’s deepening crisis. See also: “Dialogue on Despair: Assessing the West’s Cultural Crisis,” March-April 1994, pp. 16-20.

■ **“Is Life Really Getting Better?”** January 1999, pp. 23-26.

Most people assume that “progress” means more of everything—more money, more technologies, more things to buy, bigger houses and cars, etc. But shouldn’t we be asking whether “more” is better?

■ **“Doomsday Scenarios: How the World May Go On without Us,”** November-December 2001, pp. 20-23.

Homo sapiens may receive its evolutionary pink slip by 2050, according to authors tracking “spikes” in technology and population.

■ **“A New World View Struggles to Emerge,”** September-October 2004, pp. 20-24.

Are we seeing the emergence of a new view of what makes life worth living?

■ **“Nihilism, Fundamentalism, or Activism: Three Responses to Fears of the Apocalypse,”** January-February 2008, pp. 35-39.

Widespread fears of an apocalyptic future elicit equally dangerous responses: nihilistic thoughts and decadent lifestyles that accelerate environmental destruction, or fundamentalist intolerance that exacerbates social-political conflict. The only safe approach to suspicions of the apocalypse may be adaptation through activism.

(see “A New World View Struggles to Emerge,” THE FUTURIST, September-October 2004, and “Nihilism, Fundamentalism, or Activism: Three Responses to Fears of the Apocalypse,” THE FUTURIST, January-February 2008).

The emergence and growth of a new culture and consciousness will not—now—spare us from troubled and turbulent times. Rather, events will powerfully influence the course that the transformation takes, the shape of things to come after the turmoil. They could help or hinder: provide the moral force for urgent action, or preoccupy us with crisis management.

Writers like Rebecca Solnit (*A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disasters*, Viking, 2009) and Junot Díaz (“Apocalypse: What Disasters Reveal,” *Boston Review*, May-June 2011) have described the revelatory, and potentially revolutionary, nature of disasters. Not only can they bring out the best in us, and connect and empower us, but they also lay bare

the social conditions and choices that often cause or contribute to disasters, delivering a societal shock that makes change possible.

Díaz uses the 2010 earthquake to argue that Haiti is not only the most visible victim of our civilization but also a sign of what is to come. Even before the earthquake, Haiti was reeling, and it needed only the slightest shove to send it into catastrophe. In the process of causing things to fall apart, he says, apocalyptic catastrophes also give us “a chance to see aspects of our world that we as a society seek to run from, that we hide behind veils of denial.” Apocalypses are also opportunities: “chances for us to see ourselves, to take responsibility for what we see, to change.”

Creating a new human story, a new awareness of ourselves, represents a “no regrets” strategy. It might yet allow us to avoid global mayhem (as I said, I could be wrong). In the event that calamities strike, it would mitigate their effects by enhancing our personal and social resilience

and preparedness. But even in the absence of the threat of catastrophe, it would improve our quality of life. Even if we did not confront social, environmental, and economic limits and breakdowns, optimizing our health and happiness requires transformational change.

The next 20 years will settle this issue (if it isn’t settled already). We will know by then the extent to which we are locked into global crises, and if so, what we can do to minimize their impacts and to shape the world that lies on the far side. We may no longer be able to get out of the mess we’re creating for ourselves, but we can get through it. There is still plenty to dream of, and to strive for. □



#### About the Author

Richard Eckersley is an independent researcher and writer ([www.richardeckersley.com.au](http://www.richardeckersley.com.au)), and a founding director of Australia21, a non-profit research company ([www.australia21.org.au](http://www.australia21.org.au)).