Culture, progress and the future: Can the West survive its own myths?

We all know our society faces existential crisis. Rethinking our cultural values might just help us survive it

Richard Eckersley

When I was young, back in the 1970s, I spent two years travelling across the world: by truck with a group through Africa from south to north; in a campervan with a friend through northern and eastern Europe and Russia; on foot along most of the south coast of Crete; and by boat, bus, truck and train across Asia to India and Nepal.

The most difficult cultural adjustment I had to make was not to the cultures of other countries, but to my own on my return home to Australia. Many long-term Western travellers have the same experience, shocked in particular by the West's extravagant consumerism. My initial response on flying into Sydney from Bangkok was one of wonder at the orderliness and cleanliness, the abundantly stocked shops, the clear-eyed children, seemingly so healthy and carefree. However, this initial celebration of the material comforts and individual freedoms soon gave way to a growing apprehension about the Western way of life.

In a way I hadn't anticipated, the experience allowed me to view my native culture from the outside; and in ways I hadn't appreciated before, I became aware ours was a flawed and harsh culture. I realized that the Western worldview was not necessarily the truest or best, as I had been brought up and educated to believe, but just one of many, defined and supported by deeply ingrained beliefs and myths like any other.

We in the West tend to see material poverty as synonymous with misery and squalor; yet only with the most abject poverty is this so. Mostly the poorer societies I travelled through had a social cohesion and spiritual richness that I felt the West lacked. We see others as crippled by ignorance and cowed by superstition; we don't see the extent to which we are, in our own ways, oppressed by our rationalism and lack of 'superstition' (in a spiritual sense).

There were other elements to my 're-entry trauma' besides the experience of other cultures. My lifestyle, very open in some respects, was closed or contained in others: the consequences being on the road; and the almost total absence of mass media in my life. The exposure to the counter-culture of my fellow travellers, especially in Asia, was another influence.

Over the following decades, as a journalist, researcher and writer, I developed these early insights into an analysis of cultural influences on health and wellbeing; how we define and

measure human progress and development; and what the future holds for our civilization and species. This work is available on my website, including my book, *Well & Good: Morality, meaning and happiness* (2005).

'Culture' is often understood to mean the arts; or as ethnicity and ethnic differences; or a quality of specific institutions, especially when their cultures become toxic. In scientific research, culture is a challenging topic, much debated and contested, defined and used differently in different disciplines and even within the same discipline. It can be difficult to 'pin down' cultural qualities to measure their effects, which are often diffuse and pervasive, with complex interactions with other social factors.

In this essay, I use 'culture' to refer to the language and accumulated knowledge, beliefs, assumptions and values that are passed between individuals, groups and generations; a system of meanings and symbols that shapes how people see the world and their place in it, and gives meaning and order to their lives; or, more simply, as the knowledge people must possess to function adequately in society.

Culture and health

The dominant discipline in research on population health is epidemiology (although other disciplines also contribute). Over the past few decades, epidemiologists have become more interested in the so-called social determinants of health, with a particular focus on socio-economic inequality. Research suggests that the greater the inequality, the steeper the gradient in health (where at any point on the social ladder, people, on average, have better health than those below them, and worse health than those above them), and the poorer people's health overall.

However, I felt cultural factors were being neglected in this literature. This is unsurprising: epidemiology (and science more generally), tends to overlook, or underestimate, the intangible, abstract and subjective, in favour of the tangible, concrete and objective, which are easier to measure. A notable exception in the research was the work in the 1990s of psychologist and anthropologist Ellen Corin, to which I immediately related because of my travel experiences.

In contributions to two books on social determinants of health, Corin argues that culture shapes every area of life, defines a worldview that gives meaning to personal and collective experience, and frames the way people locate themselves within the world, perceive the world, and behave in it.

Humans do not live in a purely objective world in which objects and events possess an inherent and objective significance, she says; instead, these things are imbued with meanings that vary with individuals, times and societies, and which emerge from a network of associations. 'Every aspect of reality is seen embedded within webs of meaning that define a certain worldview and that cannot be studied or understood apart from this collective frame'.

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As reflected in my own experience, Corin notes that cultural influences are always easier to identify in unfamiliar societies. 'As long as one remains within one's own cultural boundaries, the ways of thinking, living, and behaving peculiar to that culture are transparent or invisible; they appear to constitute a natural order that is not itself an object of study. But this impression is an unsupported ethnocentric illusion'.

In contrast to this way of thinking about culture, epidemiology understands 'culture' mainly in terms of 'subcultures' or 'difference', especially ethnic and racial, and so, usually, as one dimension of socio-economic status and inequality. Generally speaking, the broader influence of culture on health has been seen as remote and diffuse, pervasive but unspecified. As Corin observes, epidemiology's 'categorical' approach to sociocultural factors, which fits comfortably within prevailing scientific paradigms, strips human realities of much of their social context and disregards and dismisses other approaches to social and cultural realities.

Modern Western culture's health hazards

I have written many scientific papers discussing culture and health. Perhaps the most influential is a [2006 paper](#), 'Is modern Western culture a health hazard?', published in *The International Journal of Epidemiology,* together with three commentaries by other researchers. In this paper, I argue cultural factors such as materialism and individualism are underestimated determinants of population health and wellbeing in Western societies; and that an important and growing cost of our modern way of life is 'cultural fraud': the promotion of images and ideals of 'the good life' that serve the economy but do not meet psychological needs or reflect social realities.

Research suggests that inequality impacts on health through both material and psychosocial processes: that is, they result from differences in material conditions, experiences and resources; and from people's position in the social hierarchy and their perceptions of relative disadvantage, which contribute to stress, depression, anxiety, isolation, insecurity, hostility and lack of control over one's life. These qualities affected health directly, and indirectly by encouraging unhealthy behaviour. If factors such as perceptions, expectations and emotions were part of the pathways by which inequality affected health, I argued, research also needs to take culture into account because culture influences these things.

Even if we look just at inequality, culture affects the extent to which a society tolerates or even promotes inequality, rather than discouraging it. If perceptions of social status influence levels of stress and anxiety, then cultural factors also play a critical role: for example, amplifying a sense of relative deprivation through media images of 'the good life' and celebrity lifestyles that are increasingly beyond the reach of most of us; or moderating it by providing alternative cultural models, such as downshifting and simple living, that undermine conventional social comparisons. Culture also influences the social distribution of risk behaviours like smoking and alcohol use.

However, culture's impacts are far more pervasive than these effects on inequality, penetrating and shaping every facet of life in ways that affect wellbeing, including meaning, identity, belonging and security. Consider how Western culture construes the self. When I

was at school, 60-odd years ago, we were taught that the atom was made up of solid particles, with electrons whizzing around the nucleus like planets orbiting the sun. Similarly, we think of the self as a discrete, biological entity or being. Sociologists talk of modern society as one of 'atomized' individuals.

These days science depicts the atom as more like a fuzzy cloud of electrical charges. What if we were to see the self like this, as a fuzzy cloud of relational forces and fields? As 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 more distant and diffuse, as in a sense of community or place or national or ethnic identity; some maybe 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, 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 the world. It brings us closer to how indigenous peoples see the self; and it would alter radically our personal choices and our social and political goals.

Vices and virtues

A critical consequence of the trends in modern Western culture has been their effect on [moral values](#). Values provide the framework for deciding what is important, true, right and good, and have a central role in defining relationships and meanings, and so in determining wellbeing.

Most societies have tended to reinforce values that emphasize social obligations and self-restraint and discourage those that promote self-indulgence and anti-social behaviour. Virtues are concerned with building and maintaining strong, harmonious personal relationships and social attachments, and the strength to endure adversity. Virtues serve to maintain a balance – always dynamic, always shifting - between individual needs and freedom, and social stability and order. Vices, on the other hand, are about the unrestrained satisfaction of individual wants and desires, or the capitulation to human weaknesses.

Christianity's seven deadly sins are: pride (vanity, self-centredness), envy, avarice (greed), wrath (anger, violence), gluttony, sloth (laziness, apathy) and lust. Its seven cardinal virtues are faith, hope, charity (compassion), prudence (good sense), temperance (moderation), fortitude (courage, perseverance) and religion (spirituality).

Philosopher Andre Comte-Sponville, in his book, *A Short Treatise on the Great Virtues* (2002)*,* lists these as the most important human virtues: politeness (as it is the imitation of virtue that paves the way for true virtue to be learned), fidelity, prudence, temperance, courage, justice, generosity, compassion, mercy, gratitude, humility, simplicity, tolerance, purity, gentleness, good faith, humour and, finally, love (which transcends virtue). He says that a virtuous life is not masochistic or puritanical, but a way of living well and finding love and peace.

Modern Western culture undermines, even reverses, universal values and time-tested wisdom. The result is not so much a collapse of personal morality, but a loss of moral clarity: a heightened moral ambivalence and ambiguity, a tension or dissonance between our personal values and our lifestyles and the institutional values of the organizations we work for, and a deepening cynicism and mistrust toward social institutions, especially government.

Think for a moment about how much of public life, especially as revealed by politics and the mainstream and social media, reflects and promotes the 'great virtues' (or, conversely, the vices).

Without appropriate cultural reinforcement, we find it harder to do what we believe to be 'good'; it takes more effort. And, conversely, it becomes easier to justify or rationalize bad behaviour. There are positive (reinforcing) feedbacks in the process: anti-social values weaken personal and social ties, which, in turn, reduce the 'hold' of a moral code on individuals because these ties give the code its 'leverage'; they are a source of 'moral fibre'.

Values are the foundations of social organization, and any discussion of personal wellbeing and social functioning must begin here. The sounder the foundations, the less we need to rely on elaborate supporting structures of legislation and regulation. As the 18th Century political philosopher Edmund Burke said, the less control there is from within, the more there must be from without.

Human societies are complex systems, and the management of complexity requires rules that are generic, diffuse, pervasive, flexible and internalized; in other words, they need a strong framework of values. As moral frameworks erode, and our culture becomes more rational, legalistic and technocratic, the more the work of values is supplanted by laws and regulations, which tend to be rigid, specific, and externally imposed; they are often a poor, inappropriate substitute.

Cultural fraud

The apparent harm caused by materialism and individualism raises the question of why these qualities persist and even intensify, a point I discuss in my 2006 paper. Both have conferred benefits to health and wellbeing in the past, but appear now to have passed a threshold where rising costs exceed diminishing benefits. Various forms of institutional practice encourage this cultural 'overshoot'. Government policy gives priority to sustained economic growth but leaves the content of growth largely to individuals, whose personal consumption makes the largest contribution to economic growth.

This ever-increasing consumption is not natural or inevitable, but culturally 'manufactured' by a massive and growing media-marketing complex. I cite a figure from a 2003 book, *The Consumer Trap: Big business marketing in American life*, by Michael Dawson: big business in the United States spent over US$1 trillion a year on marketing – about twice what Americans spend annually on education, private and public, from kindergarten through

graduate school. This spending includes 'macromarketing', the management of the social environment, particularly public policy, to suit the interests of business.

While other species have 'cultures' in the form of learned behaviours, humans alone require a culture to give us reasons to live, to make life worth living: to give us a sense of purpose, identity and belonging – personally, socially and spiritually – and a framework of values to guide our actions. There may be many cultural paths we can follow in meeting human needs (as I discuss later). This is the source of our extraordinary diversity and versatility, but it is also a source of danger: we can lose the path altogether, run off the rails.

In arguing in my 2006 paper that Western culture's promotion of images and ideals of 'the good life' amounted to cultural fraud, I concluded: To the extent that these images and ideals hold sway over us, they encourage goals and aspirations that are in themselves unhealthy. To the extent that we resist them because they are contrary to our own ethical and social ideals, they are a powerful source of dissonance that is also harmful to health and wellbeing.

Nevertheless, there are reasons for optimism (on this score at least): as Western culture becomes more harmful to health, we are seeing a diminishing 'cultural consonance': increasing numbers of people in Western nations are rejecting this dominant ethic of individual and material self-interest, and making, or trying to make, a comprehensive shift in their worldview, values and ways of life as they seek to close the gap between what they believe and how they live.

This is a driving dynamic behind various 'counter-cultural' movements such as simple living, downshifting, minimalism and transition movements. We are, then, witnessing parallel processes of cultural decay and renewal, a titanic contest as old ways of thinking about ourselves fail, and new ways of being human struggle for definition and acceptance.

Culture and progress

This cultural contest has obvious significance for the notion of progress, the belief that life is getting better, which is a defining feature of modern Western culture. Another line of my research has been to address this topic, including its cultural and subjective elements. The measures of progress that we use matter: good measures are a prerequisite for good governance because they are how we judge its success; they also influence how we evaluate our own lives because they affect our values, perceptions and goals. Models and measures both reflect and reinforce what we understand progress to be: if we believe the wrong thing, we will measure the wrong thing, and if we measure the wrong thing, we will do the wrong thing.

Essentially, we equate progress with modernization. Modernization is a pervasive, complex, multidimensional process which characterizes our times. It includes: industrialization, globalization, urbanization, democratization, scientific and technological advance, capitalism, secularism, rationalism, individualism and consumerism. Many of these features are part of the processes of cultural Westernization and material progress (measured as

economic growth). This equation of progress and modernization reflects a deep cultural bias.

Western nations dominate the top rankings of most indices of progress and development, and Western nations are promoted as a model of development for other countries. On the face of it, the equation seems compelling. The United Nations Development Programme has noted that past decades have seen substantial progress in many aspects of human development. Most people today are healthier, live longer, are more educated and have more access to goods and services, it says; they also have more power to select leaders, influence public decisions and share knowledge.

Thus, indicators focus on those qualities that characterize modernization and which Western culture celebrates as success or improvement, such as material wealth, high life expectancy, education, democratic governance, and individual freedom. However valuable these gains are, they do not represent the sum total of what constitutes optimal wellbeing and quality of life. Emotional, social and spiritual wellbeing barely register in this view of progress. And it is in these areas that progress has become most problematic, especially in rich nations.

Nor does this view of progress integrate adequately the requirements of environmental health and sustainability. This dimension is being addressed in new indices, although not yet adequately. Despite devoting a huge amount of social and political energy to attempting to get the policy settings right, development (as it is pursued) and sustainability remain fundamentally irreconcilable. Modernization's benefits are counted, but its costs to wellbeing are underestimated and downplayed. At best, the qualities being measured under orthodox approaches may be desirable and even necessary, but are not sufficient. At worst, the measures are resulting in a falling quality of life and leading us toward an uncertain and potentially catastrophic future.

Transforming culture

Our flawed idea of progress is being challenged by the realities of global threats to humanity, such as climate change and biodiversity loss; pollution of land, air and water; food, water and energy security; global economic crises; nuclear war; and technological anarchy (where technologies become so powerful and develop so rapidly that we lose - or cede - control over them). Without a deep change in culture, we will not close the gulf between the magnitude of the problems we face and the scale of our responses.

A cultural transformation of this extent is very different from the policy reforms and technological remedies on which our public discussions and political debates focus. The history of climate-change politics provides a clear example of the 'scale anomaly' or 'reality gap' between the threat and our response. Politics continues to produce slow, incremental change, while science demands urgent, [radical action](). The pressure on the political status quo is increasing, but has yet to crack it open; we are still 'kicking the can down the road'.

This predicament applies across the range of humanity's challenges. These are 'existential' in that they both materially and physically threaten human existence, and also undermine

people's sense of confidence and certainty about life. Culture is central to resolving the situation, both Western culture in general and the specific institutional cultures of politics and journalism, which 'concentrate' some of the worst aspects of the broader culture (so making then more visible).

Cultural factors are one driver behind growing electoral fragmentation and tribalism. A lack of a sense of belonging or social attachment was important to Donald Trump's election as US president. The veteran journalist Carl Bernstein (of Watergate fame) said recently that American democracy had not been working well for decades, and that Trump had ignited what was a 'cold civil war'. 'We make mistakes as reporters to look at the country just in terms of politics and of media. This is a cultural shift of huge dimension.'

In a previous essay in *Salon*, I argued that a deep and dangerous divide existed in liberal democracies between people's concerns about their lives, their country and their future, and the proclivities and pre-occupations of mainstream politics and news media. The cultures of politics and journalism are too 'short-sighted' and 'narrow-minded' to bridge the gulf between what we are doing as a society, and what we now know we need to do. Adding to this failure is their focus on division and conflict over a multiplicity of discrete issues, which are dealt with in isolation from the totality, complexity and interconnectedness of life. As I conclude in the essay, political debate needs to encourage the conceptual space for a transformation in our worldview, beliefs and values as profound as any in human history.

This cultural transformation can be compared to that in Europe from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment: from the medieval mind, dominated by religion and the afterlife, to the modern mind, focused on material life here and now. Historian Barbara Tuchman, in *A Distant Mirror – The calamitous 14th century* (1978/1989,) has said 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.'

Today, humanity faces another rupture or discontinuity in its view of what it is to be human which will change profoundly how we live. Just as it was impossible for the medieval mind to anticipate the modern, so too is it impossible for the modern mind to grasp what might come next. However, a greater awareness and acknowledgement of the flaws and failings of material progress and modernization encourage us to think more positively about alternative ways of living that deliver a high quality of life with much lower material consumption and social complexity. Growing and deepening crises will help to precipitate this change.

Alternative perspectives

The modern myth of material progress implies, even insists, that past life was wretched, as expressed in the oft-quoted words of 17th Century philosopher Thomas Hobbes that the life of man in his natural state was 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short'. It is true that people were materially poorer and their life expectancy lower in the past, but they often led

rich social and spiritual lives, as recent accounts of the quality of life among indigenous Australians show.

Traditional indigenous ways of living were devastated by the arrival of Europeans, but early accounts suggest a life of relative abundance and ease. Culturally speaking, the lesson is that we need to realize and accept that other, quite different, and even better, ways of making sense of the world and our lives are possible. Furthermore, we need to examine our situation at this fundamental level if we are to have a chance of achieving a higher and sustainable quality of life.

Anthropologist Wade Davis's writing is an eloquent exposition of this viewpoint. In his books, *Light at the Edge of the World: Journey through the realm of vanishing cultures* (2001/2007), and *The Wayfinders: Why ancient wisdom matters in the modern world* (2009), he urges us to heed the voices of other cultures because these remind us that there are alternatives, 'other ways of orienting human beings in social, spiritual, and ecological space'. They allow us 'to draw inspiration and comfort from the fact that the path we have taken is not the only one available, that our destiny is therefore not indelibly written in a set of choices that demonstrably and scientifically have proven not to be wise'. By their very existence, he says, the diverse cultures of the world show we can change, as we know we must, the fundamental manner in which we inhabit this planet.

Davis learned as a student to appreciate and embrace the key revelation of anthropology: the idea that distinct cultures represent unique visions of life itself, morally inspired and inherently right. Cultural beliefs really do generate different realities, separate and utterly distinct from each other, even as they face the same fundamental challenges.

The significance of an esoteric belief lies not in its veracity in some absolute sense but in what it can tell us about a culture, he says. 'What matters is the potency of the belief and the manner in which the conviction plays out in the day to day life of a people'. A child raised to believe that a mountain is the abode of a protective spirit will be a profoundly different human being from one brought up to believe that a mountain is an inert mass of rock ready to be mined. A child raised to revere forests as a spiritual home will be different from one who believes that they exist to be logged.

Davis cautions that modernity (whether identified as Westernization, globalization, capitalism, or democracy) is an expression of cultural values: 'It is not some objective force removed from the constraints of culture. And it is certainly not the true and only pulse of history'. The Western paradigm, for all its accomplishments, and inspired in so many ways, is not 'the paragon of humanity's potential', he says; 'there is no universal progression in the lives and destiny of human beings'.

The writer Barry Lopez, in *Horizons* (2019) also brings an anthropological perspective to humankind's precarity, 'a time when many see little more on the horizon but the suggestion of a dark future'. 'As time grows short, the necessity to listen attentively to foundational stories other than our own becomes more imperative…. Many cultures are still distinguished today by wisdoms not associated with modern technologies but grounded, instead, in an

acute awareness of human foibles, of the traps people tend to set for themselves as they enter the ancient labyrinth of hubris or blindly pursue the appeasement of their appetites'.

Lopez warns that if we persist in believing that we alone (whatever our culture) are right, and that we have no need to listen to anyone else's stories, we endanger ourselves. 'If we remain fearful of human diversity, our potential to evolve into the very thing we most fear - to become our own fatal nemesis - only increases'.

The future of cultures

Davis's and Lopez's warnings take me back to an early 1990s UNESCO project on the futures of cultures, which had as its hypothesis that 'cultures and their futures, rather than technological and economic developments, are at the core of humankind's highly uncertain future'. A project report notes: 'Some of the participants expressed the view that culture may well prove to be the last resort for the salvation of humankind.'

The project considered some critical questions about culture. Will economic and technological progress destroy the cultural diversity that is our precious heritage? Will the 'meaning systems' of different societies, which have provided their members with a sense of identity, meaning and place in the totality of the universe, be reduced to insignificance by the steamroller effects of mass culture, characterized by electronic media, consumer gadgets, occupational and geographic mobility and globally disseminated role models? Or, on the other hand, will the explosive release of ethnic emotions accompanying political liberation destroy all possibility of both genuine development founded on universal solidarity and community-building across differences? Will we witness a return of local chauvinisms, breeding new wars over boundaries and intercultural discriminations?

Background papers for the UNESCO project proposed two scenarios - one pessimistic, one optimistic. The pessimistic scenario is that cultures and authentic cultural values will be, throughout the world, bastardized or reduced to marginal or ornamental roles in most national societies and regional or local communities because of powerful forces of cultural standardization. These forces are technology, especially media technology; the nature of the modern state, which is bureaucratic, centralising, legalistic and controlling; and the spread of 'managerial organization' as the one best way of making decisions and coordinating actions.

The optimistic scenario is that humanity advances in global solidarity and with ecological and economic collaboration as responsible stewards of the cosmos. Numerous, vital and authentic cultures flourish, each proud of its identity while actively rejoicing in differences exhibited by other cultures. Human beings everywhere nurture a sense of possessing several partial and overlapping identities while recognising their primary allegiance to the human species. Cultural communities plunge creatively into their roots and find new ways of being modern and of contributing precious values to the universal human culture now in gestation.

Participants in the UNESCO project appeared to see the pessimistic scenario as the more likely, as things stood (and perhaps even more likely today?); the optimistic scenario was more an ideal to guide policy.

Thus with culture, as with so many other areas of modern life, humanity's destiny hangs in the balance: a dominant culture that is deeply flawed is nevertheless spreading throughout the world. Epitomized by today's global, technocratic, managerial elite, this culture has become hugely powerful, the 'default setting' for running national and world affairs. Yet its failures grow correspondingly more profound, with growing inequality and concentration of wealth and power, growing mistrust of government and other institutions, growing global problems such as climate change. At the same time, ethnic and other 'tribal' feelings have become more fervent and exclusive, often fanatical, including in the West. The 20-year war in Afghanistan is a powerful symbol of this cultural contest.

On the other hand, somewhere beyond this ugly mix, largely hidden by the outdated and dysfunctional cultures of mainstream politics and the news media, through these same dual processes, there is also the potential, the possibility, for the optimistic scenario: a world where rich cultural diversity underpins a new and vital cultural universality.

At least we should hope so. Humanity's fate hangs on the outcome.

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