(Values and Visions: Western Culture and Humanity's Future, Address by Richard Eckersley)

Reactions

The ideological battles of the future will not be fought between the left and right, which are becoming increasingly irrelevant to our situation. They will be between those who are popularly, but I believe wrongly, labeled optimists and pessimists, or, more accurately, might be called progressionists and transformationists - between those who believe we are on track towards unprecedented global peace and prosperity and those who believe current practices, policies and priorities need to be completely rethought if we are not to sink deeper into a social, economic and environmental mire.

Among futurists, the belief that our problems are systemic is gaining widespread support. Culture is seen as an important, even the most important, feature of this systemic failure.

Two years ago, *The Futurist*, the journal of the World Future Society, published an essay of mine, called The West's deepening cultural crisis, and ran a readers' poll on the issues it canvassed. In response to the core question - Is western culture failing to provide a sense of meaning, belonging and purpose and a framework of values? - 84% of respondents agreed. Only 11% disagreed.

One speaker at a recent general assembly of the society said that humanity was either standing on the brink of "a quantum leap in human psychological capabilities or heading for a global nervous breakdown."

In a recent paper in the journal, *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, the leading futurist, Willis Harman, discusses the need for what he called 'whole-system change' because the assumptions on which our current systems were built are incompatible with the goals we now need to pursue:
"Approaching the global dilemmas of our time with whole-system thinking implies that the much-talked-about problems of environmental degradation... chronic hunger and poverty etc are not so much problems as symptoms of a deeper-level condition that must be dealt with. This has to do with the basic incompatibility between widely proclaimed goals and underlying system assumptions. Pressures towards whole-system change are increasing in intensity. The critical issue is whether that change can be smooth and nondisruptive, or whether it will involve some disintegration of present structures."

Harman, like others, says that the modern worldview, which is characterised by materialism, exploitive attitudes, and faith in manipulative technology, is being challenged by an emerging worldview that reinstates the spiritual and holistic view. He frames the central question we must address in terms of meaning:

"What is the central purpose of highly industrialised societies when it no longer makes sense for that central purpose to be economic production - because that is no longer a challenge and because in the long run focusing on economic production does not lead to a viable global future?"

His answer is: *"...to advance human growth and development to the fullest extent, to promote human learning in the broadest possible definition."*

However, mainstream political and intellectual debate is much more narrowly focused and issue-based, and this perception of the need for a 'new order', a transformation, remains largely rejected or ignored. Many regard my view, for example, as too extreme, too pessimistic. A professor of psychiatry once wrote to me about a paper I had given an adolescent health conference, saying my "overall pessimism is simply the reflection of an introspective person who is steeped in the data." (A very psychiatric point of view! He may well be right, but that doesn't make me wrong.)

In the worlds of politics and business, the prevailing view is that if we stick resolutely to our current path of social, economic and technological development, we can overcome any problems and enter a new golden age.

A recent example of this perspective is the book, *The Lucky Generation - a positive view of Australia in the 21st Century*, by the British journalist William Davis (much of the book is actually about the UK; it has been adapted and retitled for an Australian readership). His optimism rests on the promises of medical miracles that will deliver better health and longer lives; increased affluence and more interesting and rewarding work; new forms of entertainment; greater gender and ethnic equity; news ways of living, and wider choices:
"The decentralised, multicultural Australia of 2050 is envied by many other countries. It is creative, outward looking, and at peace. It plays a significant role in the Asia Pacific Region, but also makes effective use of its long-standing trade relationships with America and Europe. Everyone is free to choose his or her own religion, nor none at all. The Islamic faith has spread, but this has not led to any serious conflict in the country."
"Some parts of Australia are more properous than others, but in general people are better off than they were at the start of the century. They are also healthier, better -educated, more self-reliant, and happier at work because they have more satisfying jobs. There is a strong community spirit: affluent people recognise their obligations towards those who truly need help. The welfare system is not what it used to be, but a system of selective support ensures that the less fortunate are protected."

I don't deny there have been big improvements in many areas, and I have no fundamental problem with the optimistic scenario; things might turn out this way. I agree that we tend to take for granted the many achievements of the past. And I agree with his criticism in the book of the destructive negativity of the news media.

But I disagree with the implication that this is the way we are heading, that this is a probable, maybe even somehow inevitable, progression from the past into the future. Much of the book reads like the techno-utopian visions of the 1950s. It offers no explanations of why these visions have not been realised and why, despite the advances that have occurred, survey after survey shows people have become increasingly disillusioned, anxious and stressed.

For example, Davis mentions the prospects of wondrous new treatments for mental illness, but says nothing about the dramatic increase in depressive illness, especially among young people, in the past 50 years. He says nothing about the terrible rates of suicide and attempted suicide among young people in many western nations.

Ther is no discussion of culture, or values, or beliefs, or spirituality - all the things that are so important to the human psyche. His is a very material, physical view of life. And at times he seems almost to be having it both ways: he welcomes greater equality for women and the growing concern for the environment, but is also critical of feminists like Germaine Greer, and of scientists and environmentalists whom he accuses of peddling doomsday nonsense.

Davis's book illustrates an important point: so-called 'optimists' often rest a good part of their case on the achievements of the so-called 'pessimists'. The achievements of the women's movement and the environment movement in the last thirty years, or the public health and anti-slavery movements in the last century, were not the achievements of those who looked around them and said, "well, things are a lot better than they used to be, and I'm sure they'll continue to get better", or "that's the way things have always been, and always will be". They were the achievements of people who devoted themselves to changing the attitudes and practices of their day.

So I find 'steady as she goes' optimism unconvincing, both as an assessment of the present and as a strategy for the future.

What I do have more sympathy for is the following criticism by the American liberal philosopher, Richard Rorty, of the latest book of fellow-American and historian Christopher Lasch, called The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy. Rorty wrote in a review of the book in The New Yorker this year:
"People start writing books about spiritual plight only when they have pretty much given up on politics - when they can no longer figure out what concrete practical measures might help. Then they say that only moral regeneration, or a return to religion, or a revolution in philosophy can do any good. Drifting off into an intellectual version of New Age rhetoric, they insist that nothing will be changed unless everything is changed, that the ills of the body politic can be cured only by treating our cultural soul. This rhetoric exalts the intellectuals over the politicians, the academy over the legislature, large ideas over small practical reforms."

Rorty makes a good point. We face an enormous challenge in translating the 'big picture' argument for a 'new order' into what it means at the practical level of how we live our individual lives, and of what sort of policy program we should be pursuing.

But I don't agree with his apparent dismissal of 'whole-system change'. We also need a new worldview, a new cultural framework, within which to develop policy and make lifestyle choices, and against which to test and measure their effectiveness.

At an intellectual level, the two views seem antagonistic. At a more practical level, there is a lot to be said for bringing them closer together.

Tangible and Intangible Factors

The danger in taking too narrow a view, and focusing on specific problems or specific tangible causes can be seen in Rupert Murdoch's

comments last month about young people (echoed later by Kerry Packer). Murdoch linked the need to give young people hope and opportunity, and the risk of Australia developing an underclass, directly and solely to high youth unemployment. As a solution, he suggested lower taxes, a freer labour market and higher economic growth.

Most public debate about youth issues is couched in such terms: the problems of youth are problems of specific groups of young people, usually disadvantaged - the unemployed, the homeless, the abused. We are even seeing a growing perception that the problems, especially suicide, are problems of males but not females. While not denying the particular needs of disadvantaged young people, I think it is a cruel delusion to believe the issues are confined to these groups. The evidence simply does not support this view. The issues goes much wider, much deeper.

Eliminating unemployment - if it is indeed possible in the absence of whole-system change -will not solve the problems of youth. Young people need beliefs as well as opportunities. They need to be given a belief in themselves, in their place in society and in the future, as well as opportunities for education, training and work.

The importance of cultural factors is reinforced by two large studies released this year, one in the UK, one in the US.

A 10-year study by the Carnegie Corporation in the US says profound social changes have left young Americans with less adult supervision while subjecting them to growing pressure to experiment with drugs, engage in sex and turn to violence to resolve conflicts. It calls for young people to be helped in developing close relationships with dependable adults and for instilling in them the belief that they have opportunities in mainstream society.
"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."

The UK report, 800-plus pages, written by a leading child psychiatrist and a leading criminologist (Rutter and Smith), also draws attention to the separation of young people from adult society as a key factor in explaining the rise in social and psychological problems among young people.

It notes that 'the growth of a youth culture may insulate young people from the influence of adults, in particular their parents, and increase the influence of the peer group". It also suggests that changes in society's values, especially the trend towards a more individualistic ethos - may have added to the pressure on young people to succeed. It rejects the view that rising unemployment, poverty and inequality are to blame for increased problems in adolescence.

MENU

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