

early twentieth century were followed by a wave of social science research after World War 2. As it happens, this research was often questionable or downright false. A classic example is Freudian psychoanalytic theory, which had a very slender evidence base, and which is now not taken seriously by most academic psychologists, but which was pervasive in post-war culture. In general, social science methodology was often weak in this period (and it often still is). Nevertheless, it provided a rich source of concepts, many of which have become part of everyday speech. People began to talk about society in a “disenchanted” register, of class, culture, role models and so on.

## The Great Disruption

The advent of mass media, and the transformation of the family, affected every part of society. What matters here is their effect on cultural organization. That effect was drastically to reduce society’s cultural carrying capacity, its ability to pass on its values. The loss of carrying capacity, combined with the collapse of elite cultural consensus described in the last chapter, led to an almighty social transformation, which Francis Fukuyama called the *Great Disruption*, in his book of the same name.

The Disruption began with a bang in the 1960s: an explosion of artistic creativity and social and political change. Young people rejected the values and questioned the authority of their elders. In Europe, politicized student movements shook post-war democratic systems. In America, they fought against the Vietnam war, and black people marched for civil rights. The ecological movement was born, started in America by the book *Silent Spring* and in Germany by, among others, the conceptual artist Joseph Beuys. Feminism was reborn. An earlier generation of feminists had fought for women’s political rights; the new feminists challenged orthodoxies about women’s place in society which had been unquestioned for centuries or millennia. A riot at the Stonewall Club started the gay liberation movement. The ’sixties was more than just politics. Pop, using the new medium of the long-player record, began inexorably

to contest and replace classical music as the dominant musical form, a process that reached its natural endpoint when Bob Dylan was awarded a Nobel Prize for literature (and didn't turn up). Youth became explicitly valorized over age, and has remained so ever since.

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, I guess, but the 'sixties was a joyous moment at the start of a slower-moving and more fundamental process. Starting then and continuing over the following decades, a series of indicators began to tick upwards. These include crime, alcoholism, drug abuse, family breakdown and cultural change. The story has been well told by Fukuyama, and by Gertrude Himmelfarb in *The Demoralization of Society*. I can mostly just summarize their findings.

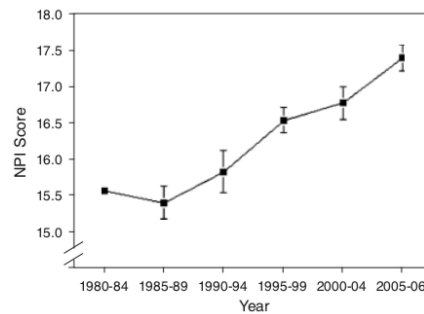
In the US, violent crime more than quadrupled from the start of the 1960s to its 1990s peak. Other Western countries, including West Germany, Austria and France, look the same. Violent crime rates in the UK went up more than *ten times*. Property crime shows similar increases in the US and many European countries. Sexual crimes by men went up sharply along with other violent crime. US and UK rates of child sexual abuse also increased sharply in the 1980s. These crimes are especially hard to measure accurately. Nevertheless, most experts do not think the increases are due to better reporting, or due to moral panics about child abuse. The liberation of the sixties was, among other things, the liberation of the powerful, sexually abusive male. Notorious examples include Roman Polanski, the film director who raped a thirteen year old girl before escaping to France; and Jimmy Saville, the Radio 1 DJ who became Britain's most prolific child abuser, enabled by a surrounding culture which was unable to question his celebrity. Saville's multiple sexual assaults included one on camera, which BBC staff dismissed as "just Jimmy fooling about".<sup>241</sup>

Sexual behaviour in general also changed. This topic is rife with problems of measurement, because people may be unwilling to tell the truth about it, and this willingness, like the behaviour itself, probably changed over time. Nevertheless, it is intu-

itively unlikely that all the changes we see are simply because people stopped concealing their sexual behaviour. Pre-marital sex became much more common, and the term became inaccurate, since people were less likely ever to get married. People started having sex earlier. The number of sexual partners they had in their lifetime increased. Some of these changes had started before the sixties – for instance, men born between the world wars were more likely to have had sex as teenagers than the generation before them. Other measures accelerated sharply for the baby boomer generation. Perhaps not surprisingly, given the advent of reliable contraception, women's sexual behaviour seems to have changed particularly sharply. Relatedly, patterns of family life began to change. Increasing numbers of children were born out of wedlock. Divorce rates increased sharply in the US and in many European countries, especially in Northern Europe. Cohabitation increasingly replaced marriage in many countries.<sup>242</sup>

People began to drink more, take more drugs, and get fatter. In the UK, alcohol consumption was flat in the 1950s, then doubled over the next two decades. US consumption increased sharply in the 1970s. The picture across different countries is more mixed: in some European countries (France, Italy) alcohol consumption came down; overall in the EU, alcohol consumption peaked in the mid-70s; deaths from liver cirrhosis follow roughly the same pattern, so this is not just an increase in harmless social drinking. Trends for drug abuse are similar. For example, cocaine and marijuana use about tripled in the US between the early 1970s and mid-1980s. US obesity rates more than doubled between the 1960s and 2000s, with most of the increase coming in the late 1970s and 1980s. Europe followed suit, with some time lag. In fact, the obesity epidemic is global, and is related to changes in the way people live, including sedentary jobs, vehicle transport, soft drinks, and television. Interestingly, the people of Japan, where crime has not risen and family structures have remained intact, have also not been getting fatter.<sup>243</sup>

Rather later than most of these trends, gambling increased, partly due to legalization



You're so vain (I bet you think this graph is about you). College students' narcissism scores from Twenge et al. (2008).

in many US states. Slot machines became increasingly common in the US and Europe. Levels of compulsive gambling appear to have gone up in parallel.<sup>244</sup>

People's relationship to their communities changed. In *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam argued that Americans were in fewer groups than they had been previously. The evidence for that is not conclusive. However, church attendance and religious belief in Europe, especially Protestant Europe, declined steeply. This decline preceded the 1960s in some countries, but got steeper and sharper during the Disruption.<sup>245</sup>

Individual attitudes also changed over this period. Most famously, levels of *trust* declined, whether in individual institutions like the government, the press, and the judiciary, or in other people more generally. Americans believed that people had got more selfish. The same is true for several Western countries. Americans also became more *narcissistic*. Narcissistic people think they are special, and are prepared to distort reality to maintain this belief. College students became substantially more narcissistic from 1979 to 2006, as measured by statements like "I am going to be a great person" and "I find it easy to manipulate people". In the 1950s, 12 per cent of American teenagers agreed with the statement "I am an important person"; by the late 1980s, 80 per cent agreed.

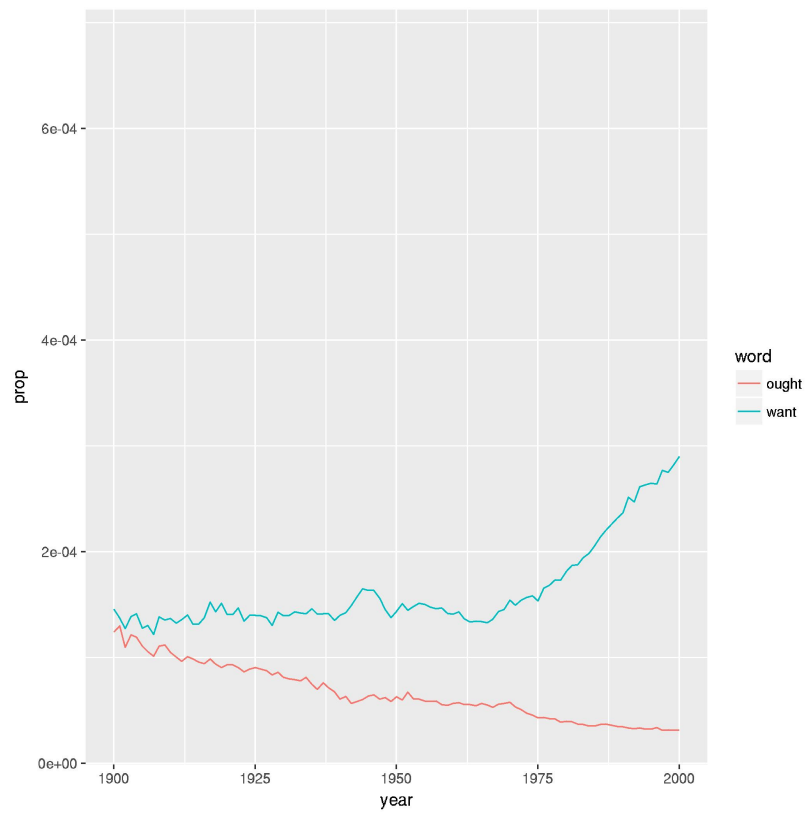
These changes are only measured by questions in attitude surveys, but they are likely to have real effects. People who say they trust others also behave differently

in experiments with real money payoffs: they are more *trustworthy* and perhaps also more trusting to their experimental partners. In psychological experiments, narcissists appear to act more selfishly; criminals are more narcissistic than ordinary people.<sup>246</sup>

Parallel changes took place in the *cultural messages* people sent. We can see this in data from Google Books, which samples text from library books in several different languages and nations. The graph below shows usage of the word “want” in Google books data, and for comparison, the word “ought”. While “ought” shows a steady decline over the century, “want” holds steady until the 1960s, then blasts off. If you look at “I” and “we” the pattern looks similar. “We”, a group pronoun, goes down. “I” jumps. Words in song lyrics show similar patterns: from the 80s to the noughties, they got more individualistic, antisocial, and emotionally negative.<sup>247</sup>

Mass culture also contained higher levels of sex and violence. Censorship, whether formal or informal, was rolled back in the US and the UK. A thriving pornography industry grew up. The proportion of top-grossing films with explicit sex scenes went from almost none in the 1950s to substantial in the 1980s. Violence ditto, but from a higher base. The quality of sex and violence also changed. There was nothing in the 1950s to match films like Sam Peckinpah’s *Straw Dogs* (1971), which featured several on-screen killings and two prolonged rape scenes, or Pasolini’s *120 Days of Sodom* (1975), the plot of which I’ll spare you. These were artistic films with a serious intent, but there were also equally violent, sexual and/or sadistic films purely for entertainment.<sup>248</sup>

A final cultural trend was the rejection of the values of the old society. The Disruption flouted authority, broke taboos, relativized morality, overturned hierarchies and defied convention. Rebellion was key to rock and roll. Literature celebrated outsiders and antiheroes. Satire became an increasingly influential medium. The American counterculture rejected the square world: a key text was Abbie Hoffman’s *Steal This Book*. Many of these trends were a mass-culture reprise of what had already happened in



Ought versus want, US google books data, 1900-2000



Mass culture reprised the elite culture of the Secession. Students at the Bauhaus, 1920s; Cocteau Twins, 1980s.

the high culture of the elite. In 1913 *Pygmalion* horrified London audiences by using “bloody” on the stage; in 1976 the Sex Pistols made a sweary live interview on national television, to much the same effect.

## What was the Disruption?

How should we understand the connection between these disparate trends? What makes them part of a single historical process? Some people think of the Disruption as a political event, driven by the struggles for emancipation of women, students, gay people and ethnic minorities. But that works better to explain the upheavals of the 1960s than these other, slow-moving trends.

Another idea is that the Great Disruption was a process of cultural change, or value change. This theory is particularly associated with the sociologist Ronald Inglehart. Inglehart believed that when people and societies were poor, they were focused on basic needs such as employment and security. Their values reflected this: they cared about economic well-being, and expressed traditional attitudes, including national pride, support for the family and respect for authority. As people got richer, however, they were able to consider “higher” needs for freedom and self-expression. Individuals