Introduction

Western societies have some problems.

Our citizens trust each other less and less. They also have decreasing levels of trust in the personnel of key social institutions, from banks to politicians to journalists. This decline in trust, which has been going on a long time, has now been reflected in the rise of populist and nationalist political parties.

Political extremism has also been abetted by new communications technologies, including social media. The way we talk to one another has been swiftly transformed, and the media landscape has fragmented into separate, polarized universes. Sometimes, we all seem to be living in our own personal "filter bubbles".

Wealth and income have become unequally distributed. Entire geographical areas feel "left behind" by the past generation of economic growth. Beyond simple poverty, many of these places face ugly behavioural and social problems, such as the growth of opiate addiction in America, as well as obesity, mental health problems, and suicide. In some places, even life expectancy has declined, for the first time in centuries.

A society can solve small problems by thinking about them. When societies have big problems, the way they are thinking about them is often itself part of the problem. In this case, deep and radical rethinking of widely held assumptions is needed before the problems can be tackled right. Failure to do this leads to misdiagnoses and inadequate, sticking-plaster solutions. I wrote this book because I believe our current

problems in the West are of this kind. They require the intellectual equivalent of major surgery. This kind of major surgery even changes the definition of the problems we face. Indeed, as we shall see, the contemporary loss of social trust and growth in behavioural problems have roots that reach back into the twentieth century, to the post-World War II period and even earlier. In fact, this book does not limit itself to the contemporary context. It steps back to look at the whole arc of "the rise of the West" in a different way.

In particular, the idea of *culture* is at the heart of the issues above. Loss of trust is partly due to a loss of shared reference points and standards of behaviour, which make strangers predictable and transparent to one another. The struggle between incumbent and populist politicians is a "culture war". Nationalists make arguments about shared culture and shared values. Social media are part of a new communications revolution that has transformed the way we talk to each other. I will argue that our behavioural problems also have cultural roots.

To understand this, we have to look again at our basic model of human behaviour. The dominant social science of the past fifty years has been economics, and the dominant model of humans is *homo economicus*. There are other ways of thinking, but none have so much practical influence on policy-making, and none have had so much broad cultural sway. *Homo economicus* is endowed with a set of well-defined goals, and chooses the best possible means to achieve them. This way of thinking is a powerful tool. But it has limits. We cannot understand our problems today without replacing it.

Left-wingers often describe the dominance of economic thinking with the word "neoliberalism". They assume that economics goes along with exaggerated respect for markets and a desire to shrink the state. This is not really true. Most academic economists do not believe markets can solve everything and do not wish to shrink the state. They are mildly less left wing than other social scientists, which isn't saying

much. In fact, the ideas that I wish to replace have long been shared between the left and right wing. Leftwingers want higher taxes and spending, rightwingers wants them lower, but both think about the world in the same basic way. In fact, many of their ideas are shared even by old-school Marxists and socialists, who were shut out of mainstream politics but have recently made a comeback. All of these groups believe that ultimately, economic issues – the distribution of income, and the rate of economic growth – are what matters. Though it is widely shared today, historically this is a very unusual point of view. I believe it is mistaken.

Rather than neoliberalism, I will call these widely shared ideas the *Washington Consensus*. This phrase reflects how much agreement the ideas hold, especially among the rich and powerful. The Washington Consensus runs like this. Humans are *homo economicus* – all basically the same, all rationally pursuing more or less self-interested goals. A well-organized society consists of good institutions which channel this self-interest to serve the general good. For example, well-functioning markets let entrepreneurs make a profit by providing goods and services that people need. Outside the market, teachers, doctors and civil servants can also be *incentivized* (a key Consensus word) to provide high quality public services, if they are carefully monitored and rewarded for performing well. At the top of the pyramid, regular democratic elections will incentivize politicians to provide the policies citizens want. The Washington Consensus is the latest iteration of *liberalism* – the tradition of political thought that developed during the Enlightenment, in opposition to political absolutism. Adam Smith said that all you needed to make a country rich was "peace, easy taxes, and a tolerable administration of justice". The Washington Consensus thinkers see themselves as Smith's heirs.*

These ideas held sway at least from the end of the Cold War until the 2008 financial crisis. This was the time when The Economist magazine, a cheerleader for the

*Originally, the "Washington Consensus" meant a specific set of macroeconomic policy proposals aimed at developing countries. I am using the phrase much more broadly.

Consensus, ran an advert quoting Larry Ellison: "I used to think, now I just read the Economist". Since 2008, the Consensus has become much less secure. If institutions were cars, Western institutions would be limousines. Our judiciaries are uncorrupt, our elections are free and fair, and our markets are deep and open. So, according to the Consensus, the West should be living in clover. But by now everyone has noticed we are not. The most obvious political symptoms came in 2016, with the vote for Britain to leave the European Union – the world's largest and most comfortable free trade area – and the election of Donald Trump in the US.

How have today's thinkers reacted to our current discontents?

"Neoliberals" on the right have taken to writing books telling us how everything is getting better. Stephen Pinker's *Better Angels of Our Nature* and Hans Rosling's *Factfulness* are good examples. On a global scale, this is true and important. But for many people in our neck of the woods, it is false. So these books are practically irrelevant.

Leftwingers want redistribution, and have developed new policies for this purpose, like a global wealth tax or a Universal Basic Income. But in the West, material wealth is not the problem. The people dying of opiate overdoses – in the US, about ten times as many as died in Vietnam – will not get better with handouts. Nor have extensive existing public services fixed this problem. (Scotland, which has the NHS, funded generously by its government, has a worse opiate problem than the US.)

That leaves the nationalists. What do they want? Does it have any merit?

Let me be clear: some people on the nationalist right are racists. Some are opportunist politicians who whip up hatred. Some are extremists who murder children in mosques. These are evil people, who must be resolutely opposed. Nevertheless, we do not dismiss all left wing parties because of Stalin or Germany's Red Army Fraction. Similarly, we ought to consider whether nationalists and identitarians have legitimate concerns. In my view, they have a sense of some real social problems. But their so-

lutions are either confused or mistaken. They blame outsiders, not realizing that the social problems of Western societies are homegrown, they come from inside ourselves. They blame elites, understandably, but they have all too often turned to shysters and con artists as their political representatives. Part of my job in this book is to give nationalist concerns their true and fair expression, and to give people currently tempted by populism a set of ideas that are worthy of them.

So, our current ideas fall short. Luckily, the materials are at hand to do better.

The starting point of this book is to ask: how are humans so successful at acting to achieve their goals? Humans often are successful this way, and any theory of human behaviour must acknowledge that. Economic models don't explain this success but simply assume it. Given a set of goals and a set of information, *homo economicus* acts optimally in the light of that information to achieve those goals. In many circumstances that is a sensible assumption, but as a world view, it misses the vital point that human goal-directed action is *taught*. When we tie our shoelaces, we don't calculate the optimal knots for ourselves. Instead, we copy what we learned from others – probably our parents. This learning process lets people around us teach us two crucial skills. One is *competence*: the ability to act for our own long-term benefit, instead of on our short-run impulses. The other is the ability to *cooperate*: doing things that may even harm ourselves in the short run, but which benefit those around us more. Without competence and cooperation, our species would not have populated the world. These ideas are not my own. They come from the theory of cultural evolution, a discipline developed by anthropologists and evolutionary theorists.

Economics assumes that competence is automatic, while cooperation is a puzzle (at least if humans are self-interested, as they are in most economic models). In fact, both are enabled by the same social process of teaching *rules* – practical rules which make us competent, and moral rules which encourage us to cooperate. This teaching process, sometimes called enculturation, is central to society. Societies that are good

at it succeed. Those that are bad at it fail. The teaching process is not just something that happens in schools. The whole of society is involved in it, from the basic building block of the family on up to high level features of social organization. It is as important as, say, the market processes that produce material goods.

In particular, I will argue that we can look at the 500-year rise of Western societies from this point of view. Part of these societies' success is that they became very good at teaching, in particular, because they possessed a new communication technology – the printing press. They also reorganized themselves to do this teaching more effectively. This change went beyond what formal institutions could have achieved. And it did not just lead to better institutions or new technology: it also changed people.

This argument is not about what caused the West to grow rich. Experts who know far more than me have not yet figured that out. It is an argument about what it means that the West developed. Said another way: side by side with the charts showing the growth of Western GDP from 1500 on, and equally important, I want to put charts showing the decline in murders, in out-of-wedlock births, in alcoholism. Unlike the GDP charts, these declines are not always smooth. Sometimes they show great historic reverses. The last half of the twentieth century was one. And side by side with, or even above, the industrial revolution in how we make things, we should put the communications revolutions in how we talk to one another. The first of these is the printing press.

The second came in the twentieth century, with the rise of electronic media and the entertainment industry. We will trace the roots of today's crisis in the cultural changes of the twentieth century, first at elite level, then more broadly after World War Two. We can see the relationship between culture change and what Francis Fukuyama called the Great Disruption – the post-1960s rise in those social indicators. And we will see how society has emerged only partly from this disruption, and how that incomplete exit conditions today's social conflicts, in the face of the third communications revolution,

the development of the internet. This revolution is still ongoing today. Lastly, I will look forward to sketch a possible future, and to consider what role Western culture, as it developed over 500 years, has to play in this new world.

This book's goal is not to attack liberalism, but to bring it back to itself. For historically, liberalism was richer, deeper and more nuanced than the version that has held sway recently. Historical liberals, including great figures like Adam Smith, Thomas Macaulay and John Stuart Mill, understood the difference between liberty and "license" – the old, disapproving word for doing whatever you wanted. They acknowledged the power and importance of the social norms and rules that embody humanity's collective wisdom. They cared about material progress, but they appreciated that social progress involved more than that, and devoted time and effort to thinking about these non-material aspects. In fact, though I hope it is innovative, certain parts of this book return to older traditions of historical thinking. The "Whig historians" of the nineteenth century looked back to the Reformation, which weakened the cultural influence of the Catholic church, as a key historical turning point. They focused on moral progress as well as material progress, and believed that moral improvement – the spread of new norms, rules and values – was central to social progress. I believe they were correct. In general, it will be a standing commitment of this book that people's ideas in the past were often insightful and reality-based, and I will defend this claim against cultural historians who assume they were living in a discursive hall of mirrors, massaging their own anxieties, or parroting class propaganda.

Major intellectual surgery is not just disruptive to academics in their ivory towers. Societies are, to a great extent, organized around their ideas. Changing ideas means reorganizing society. As old ideas lose their power, status and influence, so too do their representatives – intellectuals, politicians, even entire classes and social movements. New intellectuals, politicians and social movements rise to replace them. This is ideological combat. And that is how it should be. Marx was right: the idea of so-

cial scientists as disinterested functionaries is a fantasy, which only works in times of consensus, when society does not need new ideas. So, this far-from-Marxist book is what a Marxist would call committed social science. It takes sides. What this means in practice is that this book is aimed not only at my colleagues in academia, but at the broader public.

Any book this broad will have predecessors. In fact, since the turn of the century, some intellectuals have been trying to warn us that good institutions and economic self-interest are not enough to guarantee a well-functioning society. Frances Fukuyama pointed out that modern thought ignored the role of pride and respect in human affairs. In the context of immigration, Samuel Huntington asked of the US, *Who Are We*? Charles Murray's *Coming Apart* and Robert Putnam's *Our Kids* pointed out the growing cultural divide between rich and poor America. In the UK, David Goodhart has talked about people's need for identity in *The Road to Somewhere*. Before that, "communitarians" like Alisdair Macintyre, Michael Young and Richard Sennett were making similar points. These people are on to something. The present work seeks to help by expanding on their ideas, putting them in historical context, and clarifying a basis for them in rigorous social science.

Whose culture?

Having talked about "we", I had better explain who this "we" is. Let me start personally.

I come from the English middle classes. My father's family can trace itself back to a Welsh Methodist preacher. It contains Church of England priests, civil servants of the British Empire, and several young men who died in the First World War, as well as the odd disreputable journalist. My mother was the first of her family to go to university. Her mother and her grandmother grew up in Derbyshire. Their family contained teachers, writers and the manager of the local Coal Board.

You could fit this background into many boxes. Two are especially relevant. The first box is the biggest possible: *Western culture*. "Western" is a loose word, but take it to mean roughly those parts of the world having a Christian heritage. Western cultures share a common history and were influenced by some common processes, and much of the book describes this history. The second box is national: English or British. The substantive outcome of the common Western history is a set of national cultures. In the West, the nation is the fundamental cultural unit. This was not always true and is not true of everywhere in the world. But the conversations that made us who we are took place at national level. Nevertheless, the different cultures of the West share some features, interact a lot, and face some similar problems. So, the argument here is framed mainly in terms of "Western societies".

That does not mean everything I say is guaranteed to hold in every Western country. Moving outward from my own society, my certainty decreases in a set of concentric circles. The first circle is Britain. I am quite sure of my argument as it applies here, and many of my examples and much of my history are drawn from here. The next outer circle is the Protestant countries of Northern Europe, the United States and the "anglosphere" countries like Canada and Australia. Although I know less about these countries, I will draw examples from them too and I believe the basic framework of argument holds. The next circle is the rest of the West, including in particular France, as well as the Catholic and Orthodox countries in Southern and Eastern Europe. Here some of the same patterns hold, but the relationship between society and the state is different, and historical paths diverge at some key places. Nevertheless, my basic argument is also relevant to these societies. The last circle is the rest of the world. I do not draw these countries into my argument because I simply cannot be sure how much of what I have to say applies there. (Also, this book is big enough as it is.) But these societies too may be facing the same issues as the West. I am not trying to defend one culture against others, but to analyse the historical changes that threaten a large set of

cultures. Throughout, I will talk about "our" and "your" culture, on the assumption that most of this book's readers will be Westerners. If you are not, I hope you will still find the ideas here interesting, and perhaps applicable to your society.

The plan of this book

This book goes on a historical and intellectual journey. I believe that some of its ideas are truly new. Others already exist, but in specialist areas like cultural evolution, game theory, and the writings of German philosophers. Still other ideas have been long forgotten or dismissed, and now exist only in dusty books of history. I have tried to write plainly and clearly, but there is a lot of new stuff here. I believe this intellectual slog is worthwhile to understand your culture and society better.

Before setting off on the journey, we need to equip ourselves with some basic ideas from social science. Chapter one does that. It says what I mean by culture – a notoriously loose concept – starting from the facts of human psychology. It lays out a few key ideas: moral rules; internalization, docility and *edification*, the part of education which aims to inculcate a society's morality into the individual; the central role of coordination in social life; the process of cultural transmission, and the role of *teaching* and *enforcement institutions*. This chapter explains why culture might matter in general. It gives us a toolkit that we will keep using throughout the book.

The rest of the book is not about culture in general. Instead, it tells the history of our culture in particular. The part of the book called MAKING tells the story of how Western culture was built, and the role it played in the most important process in history: the development of the modern economy. The second chapter looks at the starting point of this process, when two technologies – the printing press and book religion – combined to create a new cultural form. The third and fourth chapters describe the outcome, which I call *hothouse culture*. That phrase means that Western societies did not just have unprecedented economic growth and strong political institutions: they also had an

unprecedentedly strong and unified moral framework, taught and enforced by powerful social institutions.

The next part, BREAKING, shows how the hothouse culture broke down in the twentieth century. Chapter four looks both at deep structural changes in society, and at cultural change, among a small number of brilliant minds. Chapter five moves into the post-1950s world, and deals with broader changes among the whole population. For this period, we have a lot of good statistical data. That lets us see those broad cultural changes, and their effects on a host of social indicators, in a wave that Frances Fukuyama called the *great disruption*. I will argue that the great disruption is not over yet. It has only changed shape.

The last part, REMAKING, moves from the past to the present. Here, we cannot make absolute predictions, only projections of what will happen *if* we do such and such. The next chapter lays out the business-as-usual scenario for our culture: what will happen if we carry on doing what we are doing. It should not come as a shock that I think this will be bad. I discuss the contemporary events mentioned above, as well as some others. If we do not now change course, we face some serious problems. Democratic politics is likely to become increasingly corrupt, factionalized and inefficient.* Non-Western countries, with values far different from our own, will not merely overtake us economically, but also exert power over us politically. But these collective, political problems are not the most serious. The weakening of our culture does its worst damage to individuals. Its cost is measured in human unhappiness, in increased levels of crime, addiction and family breakdown. Lastly, culture is more than a useful tool for achieving social outcomes: it is part of us, as much as our language or our skin. In losing it, we lose our own identities, the connections between past, present and future which make us *us*.

So, the last chapter describes how we might do things differently. That means rebuilding our culture. This rebuilding begins in the individual, family, the school and

*These words were written before Trump became president, by the way.

the community, and proceeds to the nation as a whole. It does not mean returning to an idealized past, but taking the best elements from that past and using them to create something new. Rebuilding is not something to be left to government policy. It can only be achieved by the people of Western nations themselves. This chapter is entitled *Culture: A Hacker's Guide*.

If you are an academic, and a specialist in one of the areas I touch on, then you will surely think I have made some major booboos. I trained as a political scientist, and I work in an economics department. I thought this book out for myself, and am self-taught in most of the areas that it covers. This was not from dilettantism, but because nobody else was saying what needed to be said, and I did not know any other way to say it. Writing a non-academic book has let me do things I could not do in my day job: make sweeping historical claims, advance broad and loose hypotheses, be opinionated about controversial topics. All these would earn me a rebuke from any peer reviewer. I have two excuses. First, the payoff is that I can make a big, broad argument, composed of interlocking, mutually supporting parts. Not every one of the ideas here can be proved true beyond doubt, but I do believe every one is worth thinking about, and that the overall framework that emerges is convincing.

My second excuse is simply that the job is urgent. In peaceful times, intellectuals can divide up fields knowledge and each work on their own part of the picture, hoping that eventually the pieces will fit back together. These are not peaceful times, but times of social, political and technical turmoil. We cannot wait for some future historian to make everything clear. If culture matters, then we had better start to understand it now.

Our culture seems to me like a great, impressive, mysterious set of ruins. People of today live, work and play among these ruins, sometimes glancing up at them but without much understanding, like the inhabitants of Rome in some 18th-century Grand Tourist's picture. Even the cultural historians whom I have learned from in my research often seem to share this incomprehension and puzzlement. Meanwhile, we are living

outside, without the services that houses provide, like warmth, shelter and functioning drains. Camping out can be fun, but it is not sustainable in the long term, and we are now experiencing the lack of those services. To restore the ruins, or perhaps to build something new, we must understand what purpose they served, and how they worked.

Czernowitz, August 2018.