Over the past fifty years, have things been getting better or worse? Brian Martin sets out to address this big question by looking at a range of topics, from climate to feminism, from happiness to war, from deschooling to death. Along the way, he offers personal stories and assessments of key studies. This is an invitation to avoid excessive gloom and unwarranted optimism by thinking broadly about what's been going on, examining driving forces and resistance to them.

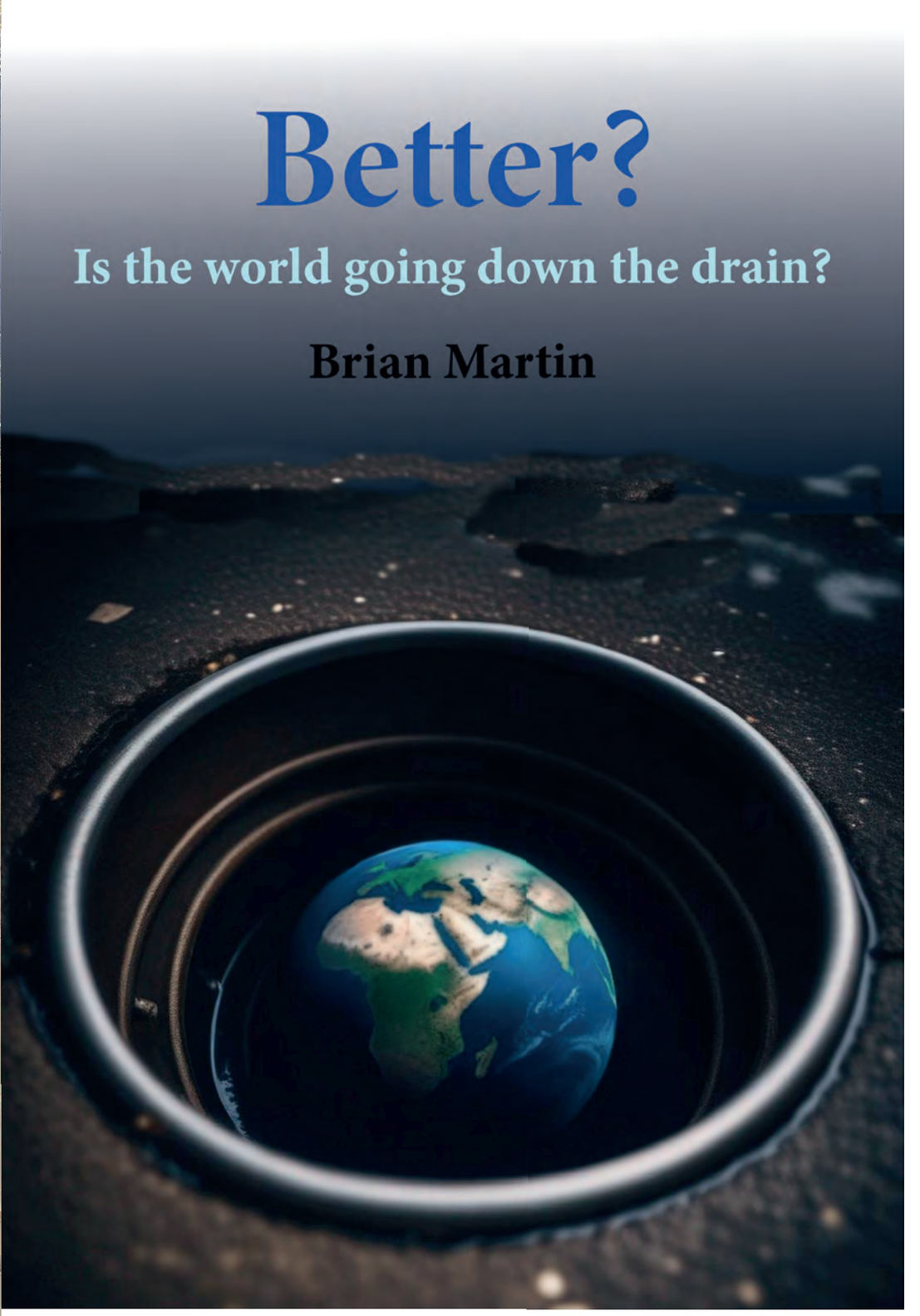
ISBN 978-918806166-9

Better? Is the world going down the drain? Brian Martin

Better?

Is the world going down the drain?

Brian Martin



Better?

Also by Brian Martin

The bias of science

Uprooting war

Scientific knowledge in controversy

Social defence, social change

Suppression stories

Information liberation

Random selection in politics (with Lyn Carson)

Nonviolence versus capitalism

Technology for nonviolent struggle

Nonviolence speaks (with Wendy Varney)

Justice ignited: the dynamics of backfire

Doing good things better

Backfire manual

Whistleblowing: a practical guide

The controversy manual

Nonviolence unbound

Ruling tactics

The deceptive activist

Vaccination panic in Australia

Social defence (with Jørgen Johansen)

Official channels

Truth tactics

Persistent panics: the wars on drugs, crime, terrorism and war

Better?

Is the world going down the drain?

Brian Martin

Published 2024 by Irene Publishing
Sparsnäs, Sweden
http://www.irenepublishing.com/
irene.publishing@gmail.com

ISBN 978–91–88061–66–9

CONTENTS

1
Introduction

My friend Jørgen lives in Sweden. We usually use email to communicate, and occasionally connect on Skype. One time, he was in a pessimistic mood about world developments — the war in Ukraine, global warming, racism and so on — and said, “Brian, tell me something positive. What’s getting better?” Put on the spot, what did I think of? Smoking and nonviolent action. Perhaps I should have made a joke, but I couldn’t think of one.

Jørgen’s question hit the mark, because I had just started studying whether things have been getting better — or worse. Some young people are so depressed by the prospect of climate catastrophe that they don’t want to have children. In contrast, others say we’ve never had it so good, so we should stop complaining and appreciate our good fortune.

I had studied research on happiness. One of the important findings is that most people have their own personal “set point.” After changes in their external circumstances, such as a promotion or a serious accident, they tend to return, after several months, to roughly the same happiness level as before. Figures from several countries show that when the per-capita standard of living increases

dramatically, average happiness self-ratings hardly change.[1]

So maybe things are getting better, but we don't appreciate it. Or maybe they're getting worse, and we adjust to that. Or maybe both: some things are getting better and some worse. That, logically, seems the most likely possibility.

A feature of human psychology is that it's hard to imagine that things could be fundamentally different, for example a world without war or a world after a nuclear war. So the implicit feeling may be that if things are bad now, they must have always been bad.

One of the ways to avoid treating the present as the norm is to compare it with the past. You can do this by reading history. You can also do it by living long enough. I'm in my 70s and have lived through many changes, but that's hardly enough to provide much insight into diverse issues. Its main advantage is real-life awareness that things change. It's all too easy to forget that things used to be much worse or, in some cases, better.

My idea was to look at quite a few issues, including specific ones like smoking and nuclear power and general ones like feminism and work, and assess whether there have been improvements over the past half-century or so. What an impossibly large project! For just one topic, let's say smoking, the volume of information is enormous. How could I become an expert on smoking and a dozen other

1 See the chapter on happiness for more on this. Like much else, the idea of a set point is contentious.

issues? To even start to do that would require decades of work, and then the analysis would need to be updated.

I needed to limit the project to make it doable. I set a maximum length per topic of 5000 words, less if possible. After pondering this still-impossible task, I came up with three ways to contain it.

First, rather than try to learn all about the topic myself, I would just introduce it and then summarise ideas from two or three authorities in the area. On smoking, I already knew of major books by two such authorities: Robert Proctor's *Golden Holocaust* and Simon Chapman's book on anti-smoking campaigning. This limited my own task: all I needed to do was find works by authorities. That raised another challenge, to which I'll return.

Second, rather than look at the whole issue, I decided to include some discussion of individuals, groups, campaigns and efforts to deal with a problem, in short social movements. The environmental movement and the feminist movement are familiar, and the same idea can be applied to other topics, such as thinking of efforts to reduce harm from smoking as being part of an anti-smoking movement. By focusing on movements, I don't need to spend as much time on the issue itself, for example the evidence and arguments for and against smoking.

Then I thought of issues where there's no social movement but I think there ought to be one. I included these in my list.

There's a subfield of sociology that examines "social problems," namely what people commonly call a problem, like drinking-driving or sexual harassment. Years ago, one study in this area resonated with me. It was titled *Social*

Problems as Social Movements.[2] The basic idea is that something isn't considered a social problem unless people are acting and organising about it. When there's no social movement, interpreted broadly, most people don't think there's a problem. I think it's worth paying attention to some of these apparent non-problems.

The third way to contain my treatment of these huge issues is to think of it as illustrating how others — including you, the reader — might proceed if you wanted to assess an issue. If I can delve into an issue without spending years of effort becoming an expert, then so can you. It's important that more people develop the capacity to make informed judgements about what's happening in the world. Historical perspective is vital, as is recognising the driving forces behind developments. Well, it's a noble idea to promote an informed public, but for me it offers a rationale for not trying to do the impossible, namely to become an expert on a multitude of topics.

Speaking of experts, I tried to contact them to see whether they think my assessments are sensible. As mentioned, for the smoking chapter there are two key authors, Robert Proctor and Simon Chapman, whose books I summarised, so I asked them whether they thought I'd done this accurately. That sounds like a good way to check my assessments, but there's a big problem, and it's not just when the experts are no longer alive or don't reply for other reasons. You see, it's me who decides which experts to choose and approach. On many issues, there are major

2 Armand L. Mauss, *Social problems as social movements* (Philadelphia, PA: J. B. Lippincott, 1975).

disagreements, so I can bias the result by my choices. On smoking I chose two ardent anti-tobacco figures. What if I chose someone sympathetic to the tobacco industry?

There's a systematic bias in my assessments, specifically in the movements I favour. This includes, for example, feminists and peace activists. You might have different priorities, and that's fine. You can come up with different conclusions, and I hope you do on at least some topics. One of the best ways to really understand issues is to engage with clashing viewpoints.

So, is the world getting better or is it going down the drain?

2
Climate

Soon after moving to Canberra in 1976, I met Mark Diesendorf, who would later play a major role in Australian campaigning on climate change. Mark was an applied mathematician and had just joined the Division of Mathematics and Statistics in CSIRO, the Australian government's major scientific research organisation.

Mark and I were both involved in campaigning against nuclear power. This meant we needed to address the larger issue of energy, specifically how to supply the energy needed for heating, transport, manufacturing and much else.

Advocates of nuclear power said energy needs would continue to grow, exponentially, and before long supplies of fossil fuels — coal, oil and natural gas — would run out or become too expensive. That's because the reserves of fossil fuels are finite: once they are used up, there are no replacements. Nuclear power could fill the gap because reserves of the fuel uranium would be enough to satisfy expanding energy needs for centuries.

To challenge this line of argument, we needed to tackle the energy issue. One argument was that uranium would eventually run out too, and then it would be necessary to rely on renewable sources of energy, from the sun and wind — so why not make the transition right now? However, this on its own wasn't a powerful argument against nuclear

power, so we tackled the assumption underlying the pro-nuclear case: that energy needs would keep expanding.

Mark and I discussed energy issues, reading about them in scientific journals and environmental movement magazines — and we made our own small contributions to the debate. In 1977, a book by Amory Lovins appeared, titled *Soft Energy Paths.* Lovins argued that relying on fossil fuels and nuclear power was a "hard energy path," because it was built on large-scale capital-intensive energy sources with high environmental impacts and undesirable social consequences. In contrast, a "soft energy path," using small-scale renewable energy sources, was much kinder to the environment and more compatible with a free society.[1]

So what about climate change? In the 1970s, it was only on the horizon, just one issue among others. Advocates of nuclear power said it caused less environmental damage than power from coal. We disagreed but also said that coal was undesirable because of the environmental effects caused by mining it and the health effects of particulate emissions from burning it.

In 1977, I wrote an article for the local newspaper, the *Canberra Times,* about energy, and included this:

> In general, fossil and nuclear-energy sources have not usually had to pay for their environmental effects. For example, carbon dioxide released from the burning of coal and oil may be altering the future climate by causing the earth's atmosphere to trap more of the

1 Amory B. Lovins, *Soft energy paths: toward a durable peace* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977).

sun's heat, but this effect is not included in the cost of using coal and oil.[2]

Shortly before writing this article, I had read Godfrey Boyle's book *Living on the Sun,* an approach to energy based explicitly on decentralisation, low technology and citizen control. I copied one passage that struck me as important: "it is entirely possible for the industrial nations of the world to terminate their dependence on non-renewable sources of energy and to create a gentler, fairer, more ecologically conscious civilisation."[3] I agreed with Boyle that making the transition to renewables was important for both environmental and social reasons.

We focused on the environmental, economic and social impacts of energy sources, arguing for energy efficiency and renewable energy as the best way forward. Climate change was just a possibility, useful as an argument about barriers to renewables and a concern if fossil-fuel energy use continued growing without bound. At that time, it would have been difficult, even fanciful, to imagine that climate change would become the single most important environmental issue worldwide.

Independently of climate concerns, many people began thinking about how to make a transition away from fossil fuels. Part of the solution was energy efficiency, for example better house insulation and more efficient motors.

---

2 "The built-in barriers to more widespread use of solar energy," *Canberra Times,* 20 December 1977.

3 Godfrey Boyle, *Living on the sun: harnessing renewable energy for an equitable society* (London: Calder & Boyars, 1975), p. 9.

Part of the solution was increasing the role of solar and wind power. In this, Mark took the initiative. He was a leader in setting up the Australasian Wind Energy Association, bringing together technical experts and industry figures. In his role as secretary of the Society for Social Responsibility in Science (Canberra), he organised a conference on "Energy and People" and edited the book growing out of the conference. He visited Denmark to see the community-constructed aerogenerator, the Tvindmill. And he started a CSIRO research project on the economics of incorporating large-scale wind power in electricity grids, and invited me to join his small research team.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, to think of wind power making a significant contribution to electricity supply was far ahead of what was happening in practice. I won't go into the details of our research but just note that it wasn't welcome in certain circles. Although Australia has enormous potential to produce wind and solar power, it also has vast coal deposits, and the coal industry had the ear of government and didn't like the challenge coming from renewables. In the early 1980s, CSIRO, where Mark worked, shut down all research on renewable energy. Mark was pushed out of his job and our research on wind power ended.

This was long before climate change became a big issue, but even back then it indicated the challenge of going against the fossil-fuel industry. Making a transition to a soft energy future was not going to be easy.

Scientific controversies

Think of debates over pesticides, fluoridation, genetically modified organisms and microwaves. In every one of these debates, there is an orthodox, dominant position, supported by most scientists, and there are powerful corporations, governments or professions with a stake in the debate. For example, chemical companies make enormous profits by selling pesticides.

These sorts of issues are called scientific controversies, but they aren't just about science, because they have social, political, economic and ethical dimensions. In most such controversies, the dominant position taken by scientists serves powerful groups with a stake in the debate. For example, in relation to pesticides, most scientists line up with the corporations.

There are two major exceptions to this pattern. One is smoking. Nearly all scientists agree it is a major health hazard and thus oppose the most powerful stakeholder, the tobacco industry. Only a few scientists have backed the industry. The other exception is climate change. Nearly all scientists agree that significant global warming is occurring, is likely to get worse and is mainly caused by human activities — it is anthropogenic. In this, they oppose the incredibly powerful fossil-fuel industry and its government backers. A few scientists take a position that supports industry. They can be called climate sceptics.

Over the years, I've read studies by some of these sceptics, who argue that the evidence for global warming isn't definitive, that it can be interpreted in other ways, that climate models can be fitted in different ways, and that historically the current changes are not especially signifi-

cant. A prominent figure is Bjørn Lomborg, a Danish writer who has argued that the money and effort being put into climate change mitigation would be better spent alleviating the situation of poor people around the world.[4]

One of the challenges faced by climate scientists is making predictions about events decades in the future. This is not like the theory of general relativity where scientists can observe the bending of light from the sun during a total eclipse, thereby confirming the theory. Scientists are usually able to make observations or undertake experiments to see whether their ideas are right, but with the climate this is impossible. A controlled experiment might involve finding hundreds of planets just like Earth, injecting their atmospheres with different amounts of greenhouse gases and then waiting a century to see what happened. Without this option, there will always be uncertainty, and it is risky to just wait and see. This is similar to the situation of researchers studying the climatic effects of nuclear war. No one wants to do an experimental test.

As well as a few scientists who are sceptical about climate science, there are quite a few members of the public, non-specialists, who question the orthodox view. I've engaged with several of them. I concede that they might be right — maybe catastrophic climate change won't happen. Then I say that, based on research I've looked into, my guess is that the chance that anthropogenic global warming will lead to disastrous human and environmental

4 Bjørn Lomborg, *The skeptical environmentalist: measuring the real state of the world* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

impacts is somewhere between 10% and 90%. In other words, it might happen. And if it might happen, then surely it is good policy to do what is possible to reduce the risk. It's like taking out insurance, or fire-proofing a building. It might be that no fire would ever occur, but it's good to reduce the risk anyway. This sounds like a strong argument, but it's not all that persuasive. One correspondent was so offended by my view that he cut off communication; he believed the chance of catastrophic global warming was zero.

Then there's the view that climate scientists are involved in some sort of herd behaviour, wanting to raise the alarm so they don't get offside with their colleagues or so they can maintain research funding. This doesn't make sense to me. Scientists are out to increase their reputations, and one way to do this is by challenging orthodoxy. So where are the dissident scientists with their own alternative climate models that come up with global stability or even global cooling? Presumably, fossil-fuel companies would be happy to fund modellers who came up with results that play down the risk. And if scientists wanted to get more funding, surely it would be better to emphasise uncertainty rather than agree on the scale of the problem?

After losing his job at CSIRO, Mark found other positions, at the Australian National University, the Australian Institute of Health, University of Technology Sydney and finally the University of New South Wales. During these years, he worked on various issues but eventually sidelined most of them to focus on climate change and the energy transition. He wrote numerous articles plus books about the science of renewable energy and everything else involved in moving to a sustainable energy system, including climate

activism.[5] Mark became a leading Australian scientist campaigning on climate change. We would catch up occasionally, and still do, and often lament the sorry state of Australian climate politics. Fossil-fuel interests remain incredibly powerful, and influential among politicians, despite the enormous growth of the climate-action movement and the potential for Australia to become a world powerhouse of energy from the sun and wind.

Australia is a small player internationally and Mark is just one of a huge number of scientists and campaigners on climate change. Unlike most other issues, there is an official body dedicated to spelling out a consensus position on climate issues, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change or IPCC. Its detailed reports have become increasingly alarmist, insisting on the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions rapidly to prevent catastrophic global warming decades from now. Many other organisations and individual scientists and campaigners have added their voices to the IPCC. For every expert who thinks the IPCC is too alarmist, there is one who thinks it is too cautious, and that the danger is even greater.

---

5 E.g., Mark Diesendorf, *Greenhouse solutions with sustainable energy* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2007); *Climate action: a campaign manual for greenhouse solutions* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2009); *Sustainable energy solutions for climate change* (Sydney: UNSW Press and Routledge, 2014).

Movement action plan

In the 1980s, an activist named Bill Moyer came up with what he called the Movement Action Plan or MAP.[6] It is a set of stages through which many social movements go, such as the US movement against nuclear power. There are normal times, then proving the failure of official institutions, ripening conditions, take off, perception of failure, majority public opinion, success, and continuing the struggle. "Perception of failure" is a counter-intuitive stage when the issue becomes a mainstream concern, for example when corporations and governments come on board. Strangely, at this point many activists become demoralised when actually they need to redouble their efforts.

The climate movement has already reached that point. Governments and corporations now say they are taking climate concerns seriously. Insurance companies and reinsurance companies, the ones that insure insurance companies, carefully examine future risks because their corporate survival depends on making accurate assessments. Following MAP, this is the time for climate activists to redouble their efforts — and many are.

The labour movement acts on behalf of workers and the feminist movement acts on behalf of women, so in a sense they are self-interested. The climate movement is different in that those who will benefit the most from the prevention of catastrophic global warming are future

6 Bill Moyer, with JoAnn McAllister, Mary Lou Finley, and Steven Soifer, *Doing Democracy: the MAP model for organizing social movements* (Gabriola Island, BC, Canada: New Society Publishers, 2001).

generations. Perhaps this isn't crucial, because many activists care about their children and grandchildren, but this isn't easy to visualise. And visualisation is usually vital in social movements. Pictures of koalas and giant redwoods are powerful in environmental campaigning, as are pictures of nuclear explosions in peace campaigning. But for climate campaigning, few visuals are available to dramatise the issue. Pictures of melting glaciers and polar bears on ice floes are not nearly as emotive as the pictures of foetuses brandished by anti-abortion campaigners or pictures of animal experiments used by animal liberationists.

In recent years, extreme droughts, heat waves, fires and floods have raised people's awareness of environmental impacts to which climate change is already contributing. Even before this, though, the climate movement had grown to become the biggest and most dynamic in the world. This was despite the images available to climate campaigners not having the urgency available to most other movements and despite the biggest problems being decades in the future. This is quite an achievement. The movement has been able to raise alarm about invisible gases, routinely produced, and create an urgency about cutting back on emissions.

Furthermore, the movement has become strong despite being opposed by fossil-fuel energy companies, which are incredibly powerful, and their political allies. Compared with other environmental campaigns — for example concerning air pollution, forestry, pesticides and nuclear power — the climate movement is by far the strongest and most dynamic. Whether it succeeds is another question.

In drawing insights from the Movement Action Plan, it is easy to assume that a social movement has some form of central planning. But this is seldom the way it works in practice. A social movement is composed of numerous groups and individuals, with a few common ideas and goals but great diversity and numerous internal tensions. There can be disagreements about methods, participants and goals. The absence of central planning in movements is both a weakness and a strength. The weakness is a lack of cohesion. The strength is flexibility, learning and resilience. What drives most movements is a perception of injustice. As long as the climate danger persists, there will be climate campaigners.

Technical fix?

What's the most effective way to reduce greenhouse gas emissions? What should change and who must do the most to adjust? In the mainstream of the climate movement and in the society more generally, the dominant assumption is that the response to the danger of global heating should maintain Western lifestyles and industries as much as possible. Consider these changes that would make a difference.

- Massive reduction in meat-eating. Producing meat using factory farming methods generates far more greenhouse gases than producing foods for a non-meat diet.
- Massive reduction in military expenditure. The world's militaries produce a significant proportion of greenhouse gases, and these are not even counted in the official totals.

- An end to planned obsolescence. When goods are manufactured to be durable and easily repaired, the volume of industrial production can be reduced.
- Urban design to encourage walking and cycling. Automobile transport is far more costly to the environment than walking and cycling. Many cities are designed to serve drivers at the expense of pedestrians and cyclists.
- Simple living. When people are satisfied with fewer possessions and less expensive ones, demands on resources and energy are less.
- Steady-state economy. Rather than seeking economic growth as a priority, the aim could be improving the quality of life for all without expansion of economic activity, at least in the material sense.

These and some other directions could make a major contribution towards addressing the drivers behind global heating. For every one of these areas, there are campaigners: the animal rights movement, the peace movement and others. Yet these efforts have not become mainstream. Instead, most attention is on replacing fossil-fuel energy sources with renewable ones. That is vital but doesn't have to be the main road.

Assessment

Over the past fifty years, there have been dramatic changes in the climate issue. By most indicators, the earth has been warming significantly due to human activities. We know about global warming mainly through scientific observations of global mean temperatures, sea level, serious storms,

the retreat of glaciers and numerous other indicators. These changes are not like bombs dropping, when the cause and impact are impossible to deny. Climate change is mostly a gradual process, which makes it easier to question and much more difficult to resist.

In the 1970s, the climate issue was just a speck on the horizon, hardly mentioned and seen mainly as hypothetical and as a reason to question the assumption that energy use could continue to grow exponentially. Many other environmental and social issues dominated people's consciousness. This has changed dramatically. In many ways, the climate movement is exceptional. It has highlighted a serious looming problem that is most significant for future generations. It has mobilised concern across the globe. And it has done this in the face of incredibly powerful resistance from the fossil-fuel industry, its government backers, and entire societies addicted to lifestyles responsible for the problem. There has been no movement quite like it in its altruistic concern for the human species and the ecosphere, bringing together scientists and citizen campaigners.

Fossil-fuel interests are the most obvious opponents of urgent change to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions, but there is something else. The economic system dominant throughout the world is shaping the response to the problem it has created. The main solution is seen as converting energy systems to renewables, without significant changes in the economic system or the lifestyles of the affluent.

I've told about how my friend Mark Diesendorf has been at the forefront of Australian efforts to promote energy alternatives since the late 1970s and has become a leading campaigner on climate change. Mark has put a lot of effort

into developing models of how energy systems can be changed to limit global warming, but he has also issued a warning: current plans may not be enough. He writes that the economic system needs to change.[7]

It is relatively easy to conclude that in the past fifty years, the climate has become hotter, with many undesirable consequences. While the climate has been getting worse, the climate movement has been getting better, namely stronger. More difficult is figuring out what's going to happen in the next half-century. Future generations will find out.

7 Mark Diesendorf and Rod Taylor, *The path to a sustainable civilisation: technological, socioeconomic and political change* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).

3
Death

27 September 2014. In a large hall in a Sydney suburb, a hundred or so people gathered to hear a talk. Most of those attending were elderly, and some were quite ill. They wanted to know how to end their own lives — peacefully.

The first hour of the meeting covered publicly available information. After this, those who wanted to stay and hear specifics needed to sign a statement. This was because the Australian government had made it illegal to provide end-of-life information. The meeting was a bit hush-hush.

The speaker was Philip Nitschke, a doctor and euthanasia campaigner. Many of those in the audience were afraid they might end up in a situation where life was no longer worth living. A popular option was to obtain pentobarbital, more commonly known as Nembutal, veterinarians' drug of choice for euthanising animals. It is important to know how much to take, and that beforehand you should take an anti-emetic, to prevent vomiting. Because it tastes terrible, you are unlikely to drink it by mistake.

The topic was grim, but Nitschke managed to add occasional levity. He explained that you used to be able to buy sleeping potions containing Nembutal but, he said, "It had an unfortunate possible side-effect — death." The Australian government made it difficult to obtain any drug that can be used to die peacefully. On the other hand, means

to die violently are readily available: guns, rope and high buildings.

Nitschke and his wife Fiona Stewart wrote a book, *The Peaceful Pill Handbook,* giving comprehensive and up-to-date information on end-of-life options. It is banned in Australia, but readily accessible online. So why bother attending a talk? Some of those attending preferred to hear about options in person, and to take the opportunity to ask questions.

The government of the Northern Territory in Australia was the first in the world to legalise voluntary euthanasia, in 1995. But doctors were reluctant to prescribe end-of-life drugs. Nitschke, who lived there at the time, stepped forward. He built a machine for delivering the drugs, and supervised four deaths under the new legislation. But then the federal parliament overruled the Northern Territory law — voluntary euthanasia was again illegal — and Nitschke decided law reform was too slow. He set up the organisation Exit International as a vehicle to promote do-it-yourself euthanasia.[1]

I was attending the meeting in Sydney not because I planned to end my life any time soon but because I was studying the euthanasia debate. The passions aroused about euthanasia are an entry point into feelings about death, and

1 Philip Nitschke and Fiona Stewart, *Killing me softly: voluntary euthanasia and the road to the peaceful pill* (Melbourne: Penguin, 2005). For an insightful treatment of the right-to-die movement internationally, see Richard N. Côté, *In search of gentle death: the fight for your right to die with dignity* (Mt. Pleasant, SC: Corinthian Books, 2012).

among these feelings, anxiety is prominent — including anxiety about future suffering without personal control over when and how to end it.

Is death getting better? This seems like a weird question. It can be interpreted in several ways, including postponing death by living longer, obtaining symbolic or literal immortality, dying without suffering, and dealing with the fear of death. Some of these might be getting better and others worse.

Death can be an awkward topic. To imagine not having consciousness, of not existing, is inherently difficult, almost self-contradictory. As Daniel Wegner and Kurt Gray put it in their insightful book *The Mind Club,* "Try as we might, it is impossible to imagine our minds in death."[2] Curiously, Gray completed the book after Wegner had died.

Seeking immortality

Would you like to live as long as possible, maybe even indefinitely? For those who want to extend their mortal existence, there are various options, including nutrients, exercise, limiting caloric intake and replacing worn-out body parts. Nevertheless, these methods can only postpone death, and so far they haven't enabled anyone to live much more than 120 years, and even getting to 100 in good active health remains rare. Despite claims of looming breakthroughs, immortality in our human bodies seems just about as far away as ever.

2 Daniel M. Wegner and Kurt Gray, *The mind club: who thinks, what feels, and why it matters* (New York: Viking, 2016).

Back in the 1970s, one of my colleagues, a pure mathematician named Tom, planned to have his body frozen, at an ultra-low temperature, when he died. He hoped that future technology — in a field called cryonics — would enable him to be brought back to life and fix whatever bodily problems had caused his death. Many others have followed this same path, some having their entire bodies frozen, some just their heads. Fifty years have not seen much progress towards achieving their hopes of bodily resurrection. One of my thoughts was that if Tom and others like him were ever brought back to life by some future civilisation, the scientists studying the reawakened humans might say, "Gosh, the people back then were a bunch of weirdos." Tom was nice enough but not an everyday sort of fellow.

One of my friends on campus, an anthropologist, said of Tom's plan, "It's fascinating what people will do to seek immortality." He was thinking of beliefs in an afterlife in a range of cultures, and elaborate plans to enable passage, most monumentally in the form of the pyramids in ancient Egypt, home of the final remains of the pharaohs.

Medicalisation

If we think back a few centuries, many people died of infections, and usually the process was fairly quick, and happened in their homes. With the development of modern medicine, there are all sorts of means to keep people alive, including drugs, surgery, oxygen and intravenous feeding. People who might have died within days can be kept alive for weeks, months or years. When people die, they're more likely to be in a hospital. This is a big change.

Keeping people alive, in other words postponing death, can be thought of as part of the human desire for longevity, for maintaining life as long as possible. But sometimes this comes at a cost, when the years of extended life are filled with suffering due to pain, disability, dependence and indignity. In a sense, dying becomes a prolonged process, and this may not be felt as an improvement.

One response is to develop means of supporting and caring for people, including assistive technology like wheelchairs and scooters, and drugs to deal with pain and discomfort. Palliative care often works remarkably well in reducing pain, breathing problems and other distressing symptoms.

But palliative care cannot address every person's needs, and it cannot always enable patients to live the sort of life they think is worthwhile. Enter voluntary euthanasia. In country after country — nearly all countries with sophisticated medical care — there has been a push to enable people with terminal illnesses to end their lives voluntarily, painlessly and peacefully.

So are things getting better? Are the final stages of life any better for those enabled to live longer through medicalisation? These are difficult questions, which might be answered differently by different people. Most people with access to advanced medical care live as long as doctors keep them alive. In places where voluntary euthanasia is an option, only a small minority obtain access to drugs to end their lives, and even fewer actually use them. Some who might be ready for death are too mentally impaired to be able to make the choice.

Social death, version 1

Attilo Stajano, from Italy, in retirement became a volunteer support person in a palliative care unit in Belgium. In his book *Only Love Remains,* he writes about the dying people he met, and their families, offering insights about the human condition available as death approaches.[3] In this moving account, Stajano displays great sensitivity to individuals and their needs.

Sometimes Stajano made extra efforts to contact relatives and enable them to make contact with the dying person. He makes many complimentary comments about the nursing and medical staff at the unit. He concludes with the story of the death of his wife, in her early 40s.

Euthanasia is legal in Belgium, but Stajano is opposed to it, believing that extending life enables greater insights and opportunities for human interaction, especially with family members.

Stajano distinguishes between physical death and social death. Physical death refers to the body whereas for Stajano social death refers to relationships. Some dying people whom he supported lost their capacity to communicate, not being aware of those around them: they no longer had social relationships. Although most people associate death with the body, in terms of personal meaning, social death in this sense may be more important.

---

3 Attilio Stajano, *Only love remains: lessons from the dying on the meaning of life. Euthanasia or palliative care?* (Russet, Sandy Lane, West Hoathly, W. Sussex, UK: Clairview, 2015). Translated from the Italian by Patricia Brigid Garvin.

Social death, version 2

Brian Lowery is a psychologist, working at Stanford University. In his book *Selfless,* he presents the view that people do not have an inner core identity, a self that engages with the world.[4] Instead, he says your self is better understood as being created by relationships, with parents, friends, co-workers, indeed everyone with whom you interact.

What about loners or those who find social interaction awkward, who stay in their rooms and play video games? Their selves were also created by relationships with parents, and even as loners they connect with others through media — with the creators of video games, others on social media, the writers of books.

Lowery distinguishes between physical death and social death. Social death, for him, is when all your relationships fade away, including relationships maintained through memories and influences. If you have children, they will remember you after you're dead, and that maintains a relationship. If you read a book by an author who died long ago, that maintains their social self.

This may sound strange. What's the point of a relationship after you're dead? But if your self is composed of relationships, then in Lowery's picture it's not tied to the body. This is a different, and possibly perplexing, way of thinking about the self, and about death.

4 Brian Lowery, *Selfless: the social creation of "you"* (New York: HarperCollins, 2023).

After death

Is death getting better or worse in relation to what happens after death? A difficult question indeed! Several major religions, including the two biggest, Christianity and Islam, say there is life after death, with the prospect of everlasting bliss in heaven or paradise, unless you end up in a place of unending torment. Among Christians, belief in hell and everlasting damnation seems to be in decline. But does this say anything about what will happen?

Buddhist doctrine gives a different picture. After your death, there is rebirth into a state, often a non-human one, that is more or less pleasant depending on your karma. In Hinduism, there is the possibility of reincarnation. In either case, it is not obvious whether prospects for after-death existence are any better or worse than decades ago.

There is some relevant scientific evidence, especially from so-called near-death experiences (NDEs).[5] When you have a heart attack and your brain function flatlines due to lack of oxygen, presumably you have little or no mental activity. However, if you survive, you may be among a minority who report vivid experiences during your time unconscious. The reported NDEs have striking similarities. They often include observing your own body from above (an out-of-body experience), going through a tunnel, seeing a light, reviewing your life, meeting others and then returning to your body. Most but not all who have NDEs feel a great sense of unity and happiness, and afterwards are transformed psychologically for the rest of their lives.

5 Hagan III, John C, ed. 2017. *The science of near-death experiences* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press).

There are also reports of similar experiences among individuals who were not near death.

NDEs are probably more common than before because medical technology has improved the recovery rate from heart attacks. Some researchers who have studied NDEs and related phenomena believe the evidence supports the idea that consciousness is not created by the brain but instead that the brain acts as a transceiver — a receiver and sender — for a universal consciousness that is independent of matter.[6]

This is all very interesting but does not say much about whether things are getting better or worse for post-death existence, or non-existence as the case may be. Perhaps religious and scientific understandings are evolving, but it is not obvious whether knowing what is likely to happen makes any difference to what will or won't happen.

Fear of death

Most people don't want to die, which makes sense in terms of evolution: those humans who had bodies and minds that hung tenaciously to life were more likely to survive and be available to support others in their group. A species in which individuals desired quick and early death would hardly be likely to thrive. From this perspective, it's in our biological heritage to fear death.

---

6 Stephan A. Schwartz, Marjorie H. Woollacott and Gary E. Schwartz (eds.), *Is consciousness primary? Perspectives from founding members of the Academy for the Advancement of Postmaterialist Sciences. Volume I: Postmaterialist sciences series* (Battle Ground, WA: AAPS Press, 2020).

Or at least that's the usual argument. For the species, in principle, there is no requirement for individuals to stay alive, because group survival is more important than individual survival. An impulse to care for others can aid the group. We can see this in the willingness of parents, in some circumstances, to sacrifice their lives for their children. In war, those who risk their lives for the cause are lauded for their courage. Still, few war heroes are seeking death, or are unafraid of it.

Ernest Becker wrote a book titled *The Denial of Death,* published in 1973. He argued that the fear of death is a key driver of human motivations. Non-human animals are unaware of their mortality; they just live their lives. The psychological predicament of humans is their awareness that they will eventually die. Becker explored these ideas through a close examination of leading thinkers in the psychoanalytic tradition, with this thesis: "the idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is a mainspring of human activity — activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny for man."[7]

One of Becker's themes is the cultural adulation of heroism, which he says "is first and foremost a reflex of the terror of death. We admire most the courage to face death; we give such valor our highest and most constant adoration; it moves us deeply in our hearts because we have doubts about how brave we ourselves would be."[8] This reminded

7 Ernest Becker, *The denial of death* (London: Souvenir, 2020; original, New York: Free Press, 1973), p. xvii.

8 Ibid., pp. 11–12.

me of the popularity of war stories and Hollywood shows about crime fighters and superheroes.

According to Becker, the standard cultural solution to the problem of the meaning of life is to seek immortality through having children or being part of a group that continues to exist, such as a nation. This solution "represents both the truth and the tragedy of man's condition: the problem of the consecration of one's life, the meaning of it, the natural surrender to something larger — these driving needs that inevitably are resolved by what is nearest at hand."[9]

Terror management theory

A decade after Becker's book appeared, three young psychologists were inspired by his ideas and decided to test them empirically. Jeff Greenberg, Tom Pyszczynski and Sheldon Solomon went on to pioneer what they termed "terror management theory" or TMT. This is not directly about controlling political terrorism but rather about people managing their own terror, or just plain fear, about their own mortality.

Imagine you are in a psychology class and asked to fill out a questionnaire, read an article and then evaluate an immigrant. If you happen to be in the control group, the article you read is about dental pain. If you are in the experimental group, the article is about death. Does the article you read — about dental pain or about death — affect, later on, your evaluation of the immigrant? According to one study, if you score high in a personality measured by the questionnaire,

9 Ibid., p. 170.

right-wing authoritarianism, you will be more hostile to the immigrant when reminded of death.[10] What's going on?

According to TMT, when you are reminded of death, you become more attached to your own culture and its customs. That's to protect you psychologically. You identify with your culture and assume your culture will survive, so it gives you a sort of immortality, but it's threatened by immigrants.

Not everyone reacts like this, which is why experiments are needed with lots of participants, to reveal patterns. In the study of attitudes towards immigrants, those low in right-wing authoritarianism, when reminded of death, liked immigrants more. Greenberg, Pyszczynski and Solomon have carried out numerous studies, and their work inspired a generation of scholars, so by now there have been hundreds of tests of TMT. Rather than try to read a bunch of technical papers in psychology journals, I turned to a popular account by the TMT founders titled *The Worm at the Core.*

They report an amazing array of findings showing that reminders of death affect us in numerous ways, almost always unconsciously. Here is their summary of their work.

> Once we formalized Becker's analysis of the human condition into terror management theory, we began fashioning experiments to test the many hypotheses that spilled readily out of the theory. Some thirty years

10 David R. Weise et al., "Terror management and attitudes toward immigrants," *European Psychologist,* vol. 17, no. 1, 2012, pp. 63–72.

> and more than five hundred studies later, there is now overwhelming evidence confirming Becker's central claim that the awareness of death gives rise to potentially debilitating terror that humans manage by perceiving themselves to be significant contributors to an ongoing cultural drama. We found, as Becker posited, that self-esteem buffers anxiety in general and anxiety about death in particular. We discovered that subtle, and subliminal, reminders of death increase devotion to one's cultural scheme of things, support for charismatic leaders, and confidence in the existence of God and belief in the efficacy of prayer. They amplify our disdain toward people who do not share our beliefs even to the point of taking solace in their demise. They drive us to compulsively smoke, drink, eat, and shop. They make us uncomfortable with our bodies and our sexuality. They impel us to drive recklessly and fry ourselves in tanning booths to bolster our self-esteem. They magnify our phobias, obsessions, and social anxieties.[11]

Has TMT made a big difference in the way we deal with death? I wish I could say yes, but if you ask a friend what they think of terror management theory, most likely they won't know what you're talking about.

Death is in the news nearly every day. People play video games involving shooting baddies and watch shows

11 Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg and Tom Pyszczynski, *The worm at the core: on the role of death in life* (Penguin, 2016), pp. 211–212.

in which violence is ever-present. Murder mysteries are a favourite. Yet despite constant reminders of death, most people don't like contemplating their own. Have you ever heard a talk-show host say "Remember, you're going to die" or a politician recommending that TMT be taught in primary schools? Despite the importance of the issues and TMT's surprising findings, it has not had a big effect outside specialist circles. So in that sense, things have not changed much in recent decades.

In the conclusion of their book, Solomon, Greenberg and Pyszczynski say we humans are caught between a rock and a hard place. The rock option is to obtain psychological security by believing in the immortality of the body or symbolic immortality through one's culture. This option has the unfortunate side-effect of supporting the persecution of unbelievers and cultural outsiders. The hard-place option is to accept that there is no ultimate meaning in human existence, so we need to create meaning through our own efforts. The trouble is that this allows death fears to emerge, and ways to counter these include drugs and consumerism. Have any of these problems changed much?

If you think that after your own death, you will have continued existence, and furthermore this will be idyllic, being reunited with others who died before you, then why should you fear death? TMT's answer is that beliefs about an afterlife are one thing, but they cannot override fears that arise from other parts of the mind.

Are people today more or less afraid of death than in generations past? According to TMT researchers, the fear is there but usually pushed out of consciousness.

Conclusion

Is death getting better or worse? In spite of attempts to greatly extend life expectancy, not much progress has been made, so for most practical purposes, death seems inevitable. But if, like my former colleague Tom, you hope for immortality via freezing your body, that's an option if you have sufficient money. But it's not guaranteed and, who knows, some future Dr Frankenstein might resurrect you as a giant frog.

What happens after death remains a mystery. Many people have beliefs about an afterlife or the lack of one, but so far the number of people who have returned after death to tell us what it's like is quite small.[12] Even if they did, would you believe them? Anyway, there's little evidence about whether things are getting better or worse for those living after death.

Then there's the process of dying. Where modern medicine is available and affordable, it is possible to keep bodies alive, despite all sorts of disabilities and diseases, for much longer than before. In one way this is an improvement, providing extra years of life. In another way, it's not so great, when the extra years are low quality and when death occurs in an aged care facility or hospital rather than where most people prefer, at home with family and friends.

The medicalisation of death has triggered, in some, a desire for a peaceful death, at one's own choice of time and place. Until recently, most governments and doctors have

12 Is Elvis one of them? Raymond A. Moody, Jr., *Elvis after life: unusual psychic experiences surrounding the death of a superstar* (Atlanta, GA: Peachtree, 1987).

opposed voluntary euthanasia, which provided an opportunity for campaigners like Philip Nitschke to fill the gap. If you want the option of a peaceful death on your own terms, and you have a terminal illness and happen to live where it is easy to obtain drugs (legally or not) to end your life, this might be considered an improvement.

One thing doesn't seem to have changed much. Most people prefer not to spend a lot of time contemplating their own death. According to terror management theorists, the fear of death influences a great deal of human thinking and behaviour. Has any of this changed? Maybe not, but at least researchers now know a lot more about it, and you can too if pondering your own mortality appeals to you.

4
Demarchy

For many years, I've been interested in alternatives to electoral democracy — alternatives that are more participatory, less reliant on representatives. One option that intrigued me was the lot system: random selection of decision-makers. In the late 1970s, I heard about the lot system from two dissident academics at the Australian National University, Fred and Merrelyn Emery. Fred did research promoting industrial democracy, and used the lot system in some of this work.[1]

In 1987, one of my colleagues at the University of Wollongong, philosopher Harry Beran, told me about work on "statistical democracy" by another philosopher, John Burnheim, who worked at the University of Sydney. Burnheim had recently authored a book on the topic.[2]

I read Burnheim's book, *Is Democracy Possible?,* and was fascinated. It includes a critique of what most people think of as democracy: voting and electing representatives who make decisions on behalf of the population. There are

---

1 F. E. Emery, *Toward real democracy* and *Toward real democracy: further problems* (Toronto: Ontario Ministry of Labour, 1989). See also Trevor A. Williams, *Learning to manage our futures: the participative redesign of societies in turbulent transition* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1982).

2 John Burnheim, *Is democracy possible? The alternative to electoral politics* (London: Polity Press, 1985).

many problems with this familiar system. It is based on bureaucracy, a way of organising work based on hierarchy and the division of labour that is standard in governments and corporations; Burnheim presents an argument against bureaucracy. More interesting was Burnheim's alternative, inspired by systems in ancient Greece.[3]

A kleroterion, used for randomly selecting jurors and office-bearers in ancient Athens

Think of a moderate-sized population, maybe ten thousand people, and all the areas where decisions need to

3 Mogens Herman Hansen, *The Athenian democracy in the age of Demosthenes: structure, principles and ideology* (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1991); Bernard Manin, *The principles of representative government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

be made, such as transport, health services, town planning and education. How will decisions be made? The normal system for a local government is electing politicians who collectively make decisions in all these areas. Burnheim said, instead, let's have a separate decision-making body for each area, one for transport, one for health services and so forth. He called these functional groups, because each one addresses a function such as transport.

Next comes an even more radical part. Rather than having elections, the members of each functional group are selected by lot, namely by a random process. Burnheim's idea is a creative rethinking of ancient Greek democracy. Because it's so different from today's representative governments, he used a different name: demarchy.

Participation

There are various ways for citizens to directly participate in decision-making. In the political sphere, campaigners and writers have pushed for ways for citizens to have their voices heard, for example in referendums and local planning processes.[4] In the workplace, there is a long tradition of workers' participation, for example on boards of management, and more radically to take over running the organisation without bosses, in workers' control.[5] In cooperatives, for example to sell food or provide loans, members have a voice in decision-making.

---

4 Benjamin R. Barber, *Strong democracy: participatory politics for a new age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

5 See the chapter on work.

I was familiar with the process of consensus decision-making, which was adopted by many activist groups for deciding who to invite to be speakers at a rally, whether to undertake civil disobedience and a host of other practical matters. Practitioners developed group decision-making procedures for raising issues, testing for agreement, allowing challenges to emerging positions, and developing creative solutions when some members are opposed to the majority view.[6]

Consensus techniques allow direct participation in decisions that affect all members. Experience shows these methods can work in small groups, maybe ten to a hundred people, and even thousands in some cases.

These alternatives face serious obstacles, and not just because they run up against powerful opponents — including politicians, owners and managers — who want to maintain their power. There is another obstacle, which can be thought of as questions. How can these alternatives be scaled up to large populations? How can citizens contribute to decision-making in a direct, substantive way when there are so many complex issues to address? And if there are representatives chosen somehow to make decisions on everyone's behalf, how can self-interest and service to special interests, in other words corruption, be prevented?

---

6 Michael Avery, Brian Auvine, Barbara Streibel and Lonnie Weiss, *Building united judgment: a handbook for consensus decision making* (Madison, WI: Center for Conflict Resolution, 1981); Virginia Coover, Ellen Deacon, Charles Esser and Christopher Moore, *Resource manual for a living revolution* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1981).

More on demarchy

Demarchy, as conceived by Burnheim, provides possible answers. Rather than one group of decision-makers being responsible for all issues, demarchy's functional groups address different issues. When members of the groups are chosen randomly, this reduces the risk of corruption.

Many politicians are self-seeking, or become self-seeking, glorying in their power. When the Green Party in Germany was set up, elected representatives from the party were expected to serve for only one term of office. That was part of the egalitarian ethos of the party. But it didn't take long for the initial Greens who were elected to decide they would stand for re-election. Politicians from other parties don't even pretend that "service" to the people should be a temporary thing.

Random selection counters this. Self-seekers have no more chance of being chosen than others. But what about the pool of possible members of each functional group? What if some individuals don't volunteer? The answer is stratified sampling from volunteers for each functional group. Imagine that more women than men volunteer for the group dealing with education policy. Then, assuming a gender balance is desirable, half the members could be chosen randomly from female volunteers and half from male volunteers. The same sort of process can be used for income, age, ethnicity or any other factor considered important.

There are many other issues to consider, including length of service, size of groups, facilitation of meetings and access to expertise. There are various ways to address them. Burnheim thought of some of them, but in practice

many solutions would be developed through trial and error. Representative government did not emerge in its present form at the beginning, but instead evolved through many stages, for example with expansion of the franchise, size of electorates, the creation of political parties and much else. Demarchy today is only a hypothetical alternative. How it would operate in practice is likely to be different from the theory in many ways.

Random selection in practice

After reading Burnheim's book, my next thought was to explore what was going on, in practical terms, that might be relevant to demarchy. I searched through databases and soon discovered some articles about randomly chosen groups used to make decisions. In Germany, a researcher, Peter Dienel, experimented with groups of 25 citizens, chosen randomly, to look at issues like energy policy. He called them planning cells.[7] In the US, Ned Crosby was doing something similar, bringing together randomly selected citizens in groups of 12 or 24 for short periods to address contentious issues like pollution from agricultural runoff, having them listen to experts with different views,

7 P. C. Dienel, *Die planungszelle: eine alternative zur establishment-demokratie* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1978; second edition, 1988). See, in English, Peter C. Dienel, "Contributing to social decision methodology: citizen reports on technological projects," in Charles Vlek and George Cvetkovich (eds.), *Social decision methodology for technological projects* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989), pp. 133–151.

deliberate on options and come up with a recommendation. He called them citizens juries.[8]

What a surprise! Burnheim had developed the idea of demarchy in abstract terms, inspired by ancient Greek democracies, without being aware of any current research on random selection. Meanwhile, Dienel and Crosby were experimenting with planning cells and citizens juries, showing what was possible in practical terms. Their findings were encouraging. The randomly selected citizens took their tasks extremely seriously, came up with sensible recommendations and were inspired and energised by their participation. This last point is especially important. Citizens, it turns out, really like participating in decision-making even when they have no direct stake in the outcome.

Carson

In 1993, I became an external PhD supervisor for Lyn Carson — Carson to her friends — who was enrolled at Southern Cross University in Lismore, a town on the coast of New South Wales. A couple of years before, Carson had been elected to the local government body in Lismore, called Lismore City Council. As one of three independents

8 Ned Crosby, "Citizens juries: one solution for difficult environmental questions," in Ortwin Renn, Thomas Webler and Peter Wiedemann (eds.), *Fairness and competence in citizen participation* (Dordrecht: Springer, 1995), pp. 157–174; Ned Crosby and Doug Nethercut, "Citizens juries: creating a trustworthy voice for the people," in John Gastil and Peter Levine (eds.), *The deliberative democracy handbook: strategies for effective civic engagement in the twenty-first century* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), pp. 111–119.

elected at that election for a four-year term of office, Carson had an unusual agenda. She wanted to try out a range of methods for consulting citizens about their views, as inputs into the decision-making process. She and her fellow Community Independent councillors set up listening posts on local streets to welcome viewpoints, created a community consultation committee, and ran citizens juries along the lines of Ned Crosby's.

Carson had a double purpose in these initiatives. She wanted to increase citizen participation, and she wanted to study the process as it occurred, in what is called action research. That's why she was doing a PhD at the same time. She wanted to learn from the experience so others could benefit.

One of her important findings concerned the reaction of other councillors, the other elected members of Lismore City Council. Some were supportive of greater consultation with citizens, but others raised objections, for example saying that they, the councillors, were elected to make decisions, so why was there any need for consultation?

After finishing her term of office and her PhD, Carson continued with research and action in citizen participation.[9] She became one of the leading practitioners in running citizens juries, and connected with others nationally and internationally in the area. In Australia, she is affiliated with the newDemocracy Foundation, which promotes citizen participation and deliberative democracy. She also initiated Democracy R&D, an international network of practitioners

9 We even wrote a book together: Lyn Carson and Brian Martin, *Random selection in politics* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1999).

and researchers on deliberative democracy that is active in dozens of countries.

Let's look at this concept of deliberative democracy, which is contrasted with the usual processes of electoral politics. Most of the time, politicians from different parties debate with each other, trying to win arguments and to gain or maintain power. In public, campaigning groups argue and attempt to persuade. The main process in both cases is arguing: asserting one's own views and countering the views of those on the other side.

Deliberation is different. It involves engaging with the issues to get to the core assumptions and values, establishing common ground and seeking mutually agreeable resolutions. Sounds good. It's more about having a respectful and collaborative search for ways forward than trying to win or maintain power and position.

Representative government

Elections and voting are seen as the essence of the usual conception of democracy. Whatever its limitations, systems of representative government usually provide far greater political freedoms to citizens when compared with authoritarian governments, in which a dictator or ruling clique has control. However, the label "democracy" has become so valued that authoritarian rulers often prefer to call their countries democratic, like the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the official name for the country of North Korea, a ruthless dictatorship.

Voting and elections are not a guarantee of true voter choice. In many authoritarian regimes, there are elections, but only certain candidates, from the ruling party, have a

chance. When the ruler is elected with 99% of the vote, this is obvious, so sophisticated rulers find ways to make the elections look more genuine. Sometimes opposition parties are allowed but hamstrung with restrictions. Sometimes voters are allowed a free choice, but the ballot counting is fraudulent.

So what is the state of play with representative government where freedom and choice are not just an illusion? Some things are getting better. World War II was a mighty struggle in which three major repressive regimes — Nazi Germany, fascist Italy and authoritarian Japan — were defeated, and replaced with functioning systems of electoral government. In the 1970s, the holdover fascist regimes in Portugal and Spain were overthrown.

Another major change was the result of independence movements that ended foreign rule by the governments of Britain, France, Netherlands, Belgium and others. These governments ruled countries in Africa, Asia and beyond, nearly always in an authoritarian and exploitative way. Think of countries like India, Indonesia, Angola and Rwanda, that gained independence from colonial rule. How did that turn out? The answer is that sometimes representative government took root, but sometimes it didn't.

Until 1945, Korea was a colony of Japan. After Japan was defeated in World War II, Korea was liberated and divided, with the north under the sway of the Soviet Union and the south under the sway of the United States. Then there was the Korean war, fought to a standstill, with the north and south becoming independent countries, though there was never a peace treaty. North Korea was a Communist dictatorship, and remained one. South Korea

was also a dictatorship, for decades, until the late 1980s when a revolutionary campaign led to the introduction of electoral democracy.

Indonesia was a colony of the Netherlands. After gaining independence in the late 1940s, it went through a period of "guided democracy" under Sukarno. Then came a disaster: an anti-communist genocide in 1965–1966 and the advent of a military-led dictatorship under Suharto, a highly repressive regime with a democratic facade. Then in 1998, popular uprisings led to the introduction of representative government. Along the way, there was genocide in East Timor and even afterwards severe repression in West Papua.

Perhaps the biggest success of representative government was in India, where the nonviolent independence movement against British rule led by Gandhi achieved success in 1947. But parliamentary democracy was interrupted in 1975 when prime minister Indira Gandhi suspended parliament, until resistance forced her out of power a few years later. The Indian government under prime minister Narendra Modi since 2014 is also throwing a shadow over representative government in the country.

In summary concerning decolonialisation, in many cases the successor governments were representative, but in many others they were not.

Another major change was the collapse of Eastern European communist regimes in 1989 and the end of the Soviet Union in 1991. These state socialist governments were democratic in name only. With the demise of most Communist systems, it seemed that capitalism was triumphant, especially given that the Chinese Communist Party

adopted market economics, but it turned out that capitalism didn't always bring along elections.

Meanwhile, along the way, representative systems had their ups and downs, with the most dramatic downs being military takeovers as in Greece, Argentina, Brazil and Egypt. In many cases, military rulers decided to hold elections to give themselves greater legitimacy, leading to military-supported governments or just authoritarian governments of varying types.

During the Cold War, Communism seemed to be the biggest threat to genuine electoral systems, but this turned out to be an illusion. The biggest obstacles to democracies of the representative types were internal, with continual "backsliding" towards authoritarianism.[10] This was most striking in the United States, seen as the beacon of democracy but in reality imposing the most restrictions on voting and where partisans have been willing to subordinate freedoms in the quest for power. Some commentators see the US moving in a fascist direction in which big business and big government control the system.[11]

---

10 Mathew Burrows and Maria J. Stephan (eds.), *Is authoritarianism staging a comeback?* (Washington, DC: The Atlantic Council, 2015).

11 Anthony R. DiMaggio, *Rising fascism in America: it can happen here* (New York: Routledge, 2022); Bertram Gross, *Friendly fascism: the new face of power in America* (New York: M. Evans and Company, 1980).

More on random selection

> Anyone who puts together low voter turnout, high voter turnover, declining party membership, governmental impotence, political paralysis, electoral fear of failure, lack of recruitment, compulsive self-promotion, chronic electoral fever, exhausting media stress, distrust, indifference and other persistent paroxysms sees the outlines of a syndrome emerging. Democratic Fatigue Syndrome is a disorder that has not yet been fully described but from which countless Western societies are nonetheless unmistakably suffering.[12]

This is the diagnosis of David Van Reybrouck in his book *Against Elections: The Case for Democracy.* For those who think elections are the essence of democracy, the title of the book may seem self-contradictory.

To present another view, Van Reybrouck goes back into the history of democracy, which etymologically means rule by the people, the demos. He notes that in ancient Athens, the members of most of the important decision-making bodies, such as the Council of 500, the People's Court and the magistracies, were chosen randomly from citizens, a system called the lot or sortition, the one that inspired Burnheim's concept of demarchy.

Athenian citizens comprised only perhaps one-sixth of the adult population, the others being women, slaves and foreigners. Although it was a flawed form of democracy, it

12 David Van Reybrouck, *Against elections: the case for democracy* (London: Bodley Head, 2016), p. 16.

was an extraordinary innovation for its time, a dramatic departure from arbitrary rule.

Sortition is Van Reybrouck's special interest. He traces its use from ancient Greece through the Middle Ages in Europe. In Florence, Venice and other cities in several parts of Europe, sortition was used in combination with elections in intricate ways to choose leaders. However, only aristocrats were involved, with no popular participation.

Through the 1700s, popular participation in decision-making was only an idea, not a practical reality. People were ruled by hereditary aristocracies. Then came the American and French revolutions, resisting and overthrowing monarchies. What system of decision-making should they use?

According to Van Reybrouck, two options were on the table, elections and sortition. The general view by key writers at the time was that elections were an aristocratic mechanism and sortition a democratic one. As we know, the revolutionaries adopted elections. According to their writings, they opposed democracy, being afraid of the lower classes having power. So they wrote constitutions that ensured continuing power for elites through elections, with only a limited number of landowners entitled to vote.

In the following decades, the franchise gradually expanded but the system worked largely the same way, ensuring that citizens were not directly involved in governance, having only an occasional and limited role of helping to choose their rulers. Along the way, the previous idea that elections were an aristocratic mechanism was reversed to the current belief that elections *are* democracy. This idea became so dominant that elections were written into the

Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Representative government is now called "democracy," so other possibilities for citizen participation have to make do with adjectival forms such as "participatory democracy," "direct democracy" and "deliberative democracy."

> Electoral fundamentalists, we have for decades clung to the ballot box as if it were the Holy Grail of democracy, only to discover that we have been clinging not to a Holy Grail but to a poisoned chalice that was deliberately set up as an anti-democratic instrument.[13]

Van Reybrouck argues for a parliamentary chamber whose members are selected randomly. This is a particularly difficult type of reform because it needs to be instituted from the top. Yet the obstacles to this sort of reform are enormous. In *Against Elections,* Van Reybrouck notes the hostility of both politicians and the mass media to the idea of sortition.

An alternative road to sortition is to begin at smaller scales, in organisations and local communities, just as Carson and others have been promoting with citizens juries. In British Columbia, a massive exercise in revising the electoral system was undertaken using randomly selected citizens. The proposal recommended by the process was narrowly defeated by the voters, but the process was widely

13 Ibid., pp. 92–93.

judged a success.[14] A similar method was used in Ireland, leading to changes in policies on abortion, same-sex marriage and more. In several countries, cities have turned to participatory budgeting, in which citizens have a direct input into funding priorities.

These initiatives receive a modest amount of attention. The question is, what are the prospects for a transformation of representative systems to more participatory ones? The political system is highly entrenched. In the past half-century, there are many examples of authoritarian regimes being overthrown but hardly any examples of similarly dramatic conversions of representative governments to more participatory alternatives. The closest might be in Belgium, where there are permanent panels of randomly selected citizens who deliberate on policies, operating alongside the representative system.[15]

As well, there are many examples of moves in the other direction. Authoritarian leaders are learning new techniques for maintaining their power and marginalising popular challenges.[16] Electoral systems are, in many places, ever more compromised by business and other powerful inside interests.

---

14 Mark E. Warren and Hilary Pearse (eds.), *Designing deliberative democracy: the British Columbia Citizens' Assembly* (Cambridge University Press, 2008).

15 "The Ostbelgien model: institutionalising deliberative democracy", BertelsmannStiftung, Shortcut 7, March 2022.

16 William J. Dobson, *The dictator's learning curve: inside the global battle for democracy* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2012).

Conclusion

Has democracy gotten better in recent decades? If we're talking about representative government, then the answer might be "maybe": in some places yes, others no. If we're talking about citizens having direct participation in decision-making — rather than an indirect influence through voting and elections — there wasn't all that much before and there's not all that much now. But there's no doubt about one thing: a great many people are pushing to have more say. The issue of what democracy is and should be hasn't been settled.

My focus has been on demarchy, a particular version of participatory democracy. It's gone from an idea in the mind of one philosopher, John Burnheim, to an idea in the minds of a few others — but not much more. Well, that's a bit unfair. There is a lot more attention to random selection in politics. Worldwide, there have been hundreds of planning cells, citizens juries, deliberative polls, citizen assemblies and other participative and deliberative activities. These may be laying the basis for moves towards demarchy.

5
Deschooling

When I was a teenager, a very long time ago, I enjoyed school but was more interested in learning on my own, exploring topics that interested me. As well as reading novels, I read books about anthropology, social psychology and the meaning of death. Three of my favourite authors were Ashley Montagu, Erich Fromm and Bertrand Russell, who were never mentioned in classes. My best subjects were mathematics and physics. High-school physics offerings were limited, so I spent pleasurable hours working through problems in university physics textbooks.

My experience was quite different from most of my fellow high school students, though I didn't really think about it at the time. Only later did I realise how schooling can dull the love of learning.

"Schooling" here refers to a model of education in which students are given formal instruction, assigned tasks and assessed on their performance. It is the model used in primary schools, high schools and universities throughout most of the world. It is prized. Schooling is a human right, and children are considered deprived when they have no access to it.

Schooling can open students' eyes to many wondrous things, as well as provide skills useful for jobs and careers. It offers protected time devoted to learning activities. Yet despite these advantages, there are downsides.

As a university teacher for several decades, I've learned that a central challenge is to motivate students to do the work assigned. Some students are keen and hard-working, but others do as little as they can to get by. Most importantly, only a tiny minority of students seek to keep learning independently of classes. Have you ever met a student who continues studying the day after the final exam?

There's another problem: assessments encourage poor learning habits. Most students procrastinate and then cram before exams and stay up late writing essays. Research shows this is a poor way to learn.[1]

Perhaps worst of all is that students learn, without being explicitly taught, that learning is something that has to be obtained from teachers who are treated as authorities, and that studying is something to be avoided whenever possible, only undertaken under the pressure of assessment. Hence, when classes are over, it's an escape from the need to study. What a lesson!

In my years of teaching undergraduates, I've marked thousands of essays, providing comments on how to improve. Yet in all this time, I cannot remember a single student who, after receiving my comments, revised their essay and showed it to me. Indeed, very few students ever asked me for additional feedback, beyond that provided along with a grade. For students, assessment drives behaviour, so although repeatedly revising one's writing is a powerful way to learn, it's seldom done — unless it's required.

---

1 Benedict Carey, *How we learn: the surprising truth about when, where, and why it happens* (New York: Random House, 2014).

In educational writing, you can find discussions of "lifelong learning." The idea is that everyone should be learning their whole lives, a noble objective. The trouble is that compulsory schooling often causes students to think that when there are no classes and no assessments, there's no point in putting effort into learning.

When students believe their own learning depends on teachers and assessment, this mainly applies to the topics in the school syllabus. When children, or adults, want to learn something for their own reasons, they can achieve amazing things. Memorising sports statistics, learning crafts, probing the psychology of family and friends, undertaking home repairs, exploring wilderness, understanding the behaviour of animals: these are just some of the areas where individuals and groups have pursued knowledge without classes, formal teaching or assessment.

There is something important here: motivation. When people learn when they want to, for their own purposes, because they are curious, this is called having intrinsic motivation. When they learn because of some other incentive, such as grades, payment or pleasing parents, this is extrinsic motivation. The trouble with extrinsic motivation is that when it is removed, effort to learn usually stops. When the exam is over, what's the point of studying? Intrinsic motivation is the basis for lifelong learning but there's a cruel twist. When you are given an incentive to learn something, this can kill your intrinsic motivation. If

you want to sabotage someone's learning, reward them for it — and then terminate the reward.[2]

Compulsory schooling is ideal for undermining intrinsic motivation. At least that is my experience. I was turned off several subjects by being forced to take courses in them.

How about the idea of abolishing schooling and reorganising society to facilitate learning as an integral part of life? There's a word for this: deschooling.

Deschooling Society

Ivan Illich was born in Vienna, studied philosophy and theology in Rome, and did a PhD in Germany. He worked as a priest in New York City and Puerto Rico. He co-founded the Center for Intercultural Documentation (CIDOC) in Cuernavaca, Mexico, where he organised discussions of institutional alternatives. In 1971, his book *Deschooling Society* was published. It generated extensive comment.

I read *Deschooling Society* not long after its publication. It greatly affected my thinking, and I started reading other works presenting radical ideas about education. I read it again in 2023, probably more carefully than the first time, and certainly with a different perspective.

Illich presents a damning account of schooling. He provides a few statistics and examples, but the book's impact derives more from assertion than detailed argumentation. Reading it half a century later, much of the book

2 Alfie Kohn, *Punished by rewards: the trouble with gold stars, incentive plans, A's, praise, and other bribes* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993).

seemed to me a combination of dated statistics and glorious rhetoric.

Illich defines school as "the age-specific, teacher-related process requiring full-time attendance at an obligatory curriculum."[3] He distinguishes between schooling as a formal process and education, which refers to actual learning. On the first page of *Deschooling Society,* he writes,

> The pupil is thereby "schooled" to confuse teaching with learning, grade advancement with education, a diploma with competence, and fluency with the ability to say something new.[4]

Illich's special interest is in the poor, and how schools fail them. In both North and Latin America,

> the mere existence of school discourages and disables the poor from taking control of their own learning. All over the world the school has an anti-educational effect on society; school is recognized as the institution which specializes in education. … Equal educational opportunity is, indeed, both a desirable and a feasible goal, but to equate this with obligatory schooling is to confuse salvation with the Church. School has become the world religion of a modernized proletariat,

3 Ivan Illich, *Deschooling society* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), pp. 25–26.

4 Ibid., p. 1.

> and makes futile promises of salvation to the poor of the technological age.[5]

Getting rid of schools is certainly radical, but wouldn't that make things worse for the poor? They wouldn't obtain the diplomas and degrees needed for getting jobs, and this would disadvantage them further. Illich addresses this: "… we need a law forbidding discrimination in hiring, voting, or admission to centers of learning based on previous attendance at some curriculum."[6]

In many places today, employers are not supposed to consider a job applicant's age or gender. Illich argues that they should also not be able to consider schooling. This would be a dramatic change. In curriculum vitae for academic jobs, usually the first thing listed is "Education," with degrees and institutions. Without screening by credentials, how could employers make a choice between candidates? Illich says it's okay to have tests of competence.

Deschooling Society is about schooling and deschooling, but Illich also presents his ideas about institutions more generally. He distinguishes between manipulated and convivial institutions, using examples from the highway system, health, the military and prisons. These critiques foreshadowed several of his later books.[7] In rereading *Deschooling Society,* I was fascinated to see a critique of

5 Ibid., pp. 8, 10.

6 Ibid., p. 11.

7 Among them are *Tools for conviviality* (1973), *Energy and equity* (1974) and *Medical nemesis: the expropriation of health* (1975).

militarism, a topic rarely mentioned in later commentary on Illich's ideas.

Learning webs

After providing a withering critique of schooling and other disabling institutions, Illich turns to his alternative, deschooling. It involves four learning webs, which entirely replace schools. The first web is things, tools for learning. Children, and adults too, should be able to access places and objects throughout the community to aid their learning. They should be able to enter workplaces to observe and, in some cases, participate in activities. Imagine a bakery, legal practice, construction site, railway or whatever. They need to be adapted for learners. This might include special facilities, opening hours and staffing to cater for children wanting to learn. This is a vision of a differently organised society. Deschooling doesn't just mean getting rid of schools: it means radically transforming the rest of society to enable learning.

Have you ever tried to take apart a washing machine, a car engine or a phone? With the latest technology, this is difficult because designers make things so they can't easily be fixed. Then, when things break down, it is cheaper and easier to buy replacements than make repairs. In a deschooled society, Illich argues, this would need to be different. Children and adults learn by taking things apart and reassembling them, so technology design should prioritise learning and hence being able to understand everyday objects by taking them apart and fixing them. What a radical idea in an age of planned obsolescence!

Deschooling is about making it easy to learn in all parts of life.

Illich's second learning web is skill exchanges. If you want to learn to play the guitar, speak Mandarin, cook or do algebra, you could find a teacher. Skill exchanges already exist in some areas, but are constrained by the resources tied up in institutions, including teachers. Without these monopolising institutions, there would be more teachers available. But why would they want to help you learn? Illich doesn't delve into alternative economic systems except for mentioning vouchers, namely a government allocation of money for each individual for educational purposes. The idea of vouchers is often seen as a politically conservative initiative to undermine public schooling, but in a deschooled society vouchers could play a liberating role, because there would be much greater freedom to choose when, how and with whom to learn. Even so, exactly how this would work, in terms of the way the economic system would operate, is not spelled out by Illich.

His third learning web is peer-matching, putting people in touch with others having the same interests and wanting to pursue them. The Internet makes this far easier, and all sorts of peer-learning groups exist. Think for example of historical societies, astronomy clubs and disease sufferers sharing experiences of illness and treatment.

Illich's fourth learning web is "reference services to educators-at-large." If there are no longer teachers in schools to guide learning, there would need to be independent educators because parents "need guidance, individual learners need assistance, and the networks need people to

operate them."[8] As Illich notes, this web is hardest to imagine because the role of the conventional teacher has become normalised.

Illich imagines that these four learning webs will not just replace schooling but provide something more: a better way of life for all, especially the poor of the world, who will escape the crippling assumptions of schooling and be able to develop in their own ways. As noted, deschooling can only occur with accompanying changes throughout society to foster learning and to replace other "disabling institutions," including product design, transport methods, health systems, policing and defence.

Whatever the value of Illich's alternative, he got one thing wrong. He wrote that "The disestablishment of school will inevitably happen — and it will happen surprisingly fast."[9] Half a century later, there are few signs of schools disappearing. It would certainly be surprising were they to disappear quickly.

Reading *Deschooling Society* in the early 1970s led me to search for other critiques of educational systems, and there are plenty of them. Some of the most incisive practitioners and writers were part of Illich's own network, including Paulo Freire, Paul Goodman, John Holt, Everett Reimer and Joel Spring.[10] Their outpourings of insights

---

8 *Deschooling society,* p. 97.

9 Ibid., p. 102.

10 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972); Paul Goodman, *Compulsory mis-education* (New York: Vintage, 1962); John Holt, *Freedom and beyond* (Pelican, 1973); John Holt, *Instead of education: ways to help people do*

suggest the power of the engagements at CIDOC — the Center for Intercultural Documentation — over which Illich presided, and suggest the potential of independent intellectual activity.

Post-Illich

I searched for recent writings about deschooling but there aren't all that many. The most substantial treatment is a book titled *Deschooling Our Lives,* published 25 years after *Deschooling Society.*[11] It contains short contributions from many authors personally involved in alternatives to schools, especially homeschoolers. The most often cited figure is John Holt, who wrote several books on learning and founded the magazine *Growing Without Schooling* that provided information and inspiration to a generation. The foreword to the book is by Illich. He tells about how, even as *Deschooling Society* was being published, he had second thoughts. He began to see the obsession with education as a deeper problem than schooling, arguing that education should not be a task, as something to be achieved, but should grow naturally from life — from a life in which the means for learning are abundant rather than scarce, in which there is no need to make special arrangements for learning.

---

things (Penguin, 1977); Everett W. Reimer, *School is dead: an essay on alternatives in education* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971); Joel H. Spring, *Education and the rise of the corporate state* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972).

11 Matt Hern (ed.), *Deschooling our lives* (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 1996).

Deschooling today?

Are there any moves towards deschooling? In some countries, there is a small but vigorous interest in free schools, homeschooling and self-education, which are compatible with deschooling.

Separately from such initiatives, some trends are supportive of deschooling. The most significant development is the Internet. There are volumes of information available online, so anyone interested in any topic can learn a lot on their own. Not only is there information, there is guidance, namely how-to instructions on learning just about anything you can imagine, from mathematics to crocheting. The Internet fulfils the functions of one of Illich's learning webs.

The Internet does more than offer information: it is a way of connecting with others. Children can make contact with others, and learn from teachers and from each other. On all sorts of topics, from dinosaurs to Alzheimer's disease, there are forums for exchanging ideas and arguing over them. This can be a stimulating way to learn.

Another development is the expansion of homeschooling, as more parents are disaffected with schools, with an additional push from Covid lockdowns. Homeschooling may or may not give children greater freedom to learn, as it depends greatly on parents, in particular whether they impose a curriculum on their children.

These developments are important, but they are not deschooling, at least not yet. Most importantly, society needs to change so that children (and adults) can freely choose learning activities in the local community. In Illich's language, society needs to become convivial, so children

can find teachers, mentors, guides and learning groups in all sorts of areas, and safely pursue their interests. This is far away. Imagine a six-year-old child wanting to learn about some field, let's say law or engineering. How many law or engineering firms are set up to enable this? Only in a few occupations, like farming, is it likely that children learn about an occupation through practical experience while growing up.

One recent discussion of deschooling is by Tara Bartlett and Daniel Schugurensky.[12] After discussing Illich and *Deschooling Society,* they address relationships between deschooling and four alternatives: remote learning, homeschooling, microschooling (small groups brought together privately) and unschooling (homeschooling with autonomy from any school syllabus). They note that remote learning is not a big departure from in-person schooling. Homeschooling, when it is not authoritarian, still has some shortcomings: home infrastructure is needed, and some families do not have extensive resources or available time. Also, children may be exposed only to home culture and have limited contact with peers.

Unschooling, in which children are left to their own devices, may suffer from lack of guidance. In practice, unschooling often means homeschooling because community resources for learning are limited, as are opportunities for socialisation.

12 Tara Bartlett and Daniel Schugurensky, "*Deschooling Society* 50 years later: revisiting Ivan Illich in the era of COVID-19," *Sisyphus — Journal of Education,* vol. 8, no. 3, 2020, pp. 65–84.

If you start reading radical commentaries on education, the name that comes up most often is Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator who taught learning for liberation, for example developing adult literacy through understanding words for personal experiences of oppression and freedom. I sometimes wondered why, in educational circles, Freire receives so much more attention than Illich. Bartlett and Schugurensky provide a clue. They note that Freire wanted to make schools more democratic, not abolish them. It's understandable that this is more attractive to educational reformers.

Obstacles to deschooling

Schooling is a massive enterprise throughout the world. There are investments in buildings and equipment, trained teachers pursuing their careers and their passions, administrators developing teaching materials and regular financial outlays from governments and private sources. In short, schooling is institutionalised. It's a system that is unlikely to be overturned or replaced without an enormous struggle.

Schooling is also institutionalised in people's thinking and in the routines of their daily lives. Most people never imagine a different system, especially one so fundamentally different. Many parents use school as a child-minding service for most of the year, and would have a hard time if schools were not there, as shown during Covid lockdowns. Deschooling is a threat to people's ideas about the way the world works.

Another enormous obstacle to deschooling is credentials. Schools — including universities — are only partly about learning. Just as important, in many ways, is certifi-

cation of educational achievement. Imagine a university that only provides support for learning, without any degrees. How many students would want to attend? My guess is one out of ten. For most students, the major motivation for studying is the certificate at the end, a diploma or degree that is a ticket to desirable employment and social status.

Critics of schooling have argued that credentials serve to "reproduce the class structure." What this means is that the schooling system helps to maintain social and economic inequality by providing a seemingly legitimate way for those who are well-off to pass their advantages to their children. Schooling provides legitimacy because it seems that success is due to merit. In practice, children in affluent families have the advantage of an intellectually rich upbringing at home and of being more likely to attend schools with better teachers and facilities.

In a sense, school-based inequalities are an advance over the previous system based purely on inheritance. In modern societies, it is less possible to justify inequality purely on the social class of your parents. Credential systems serve as a substitute, with the advantage that talented members of lower classes are able to rise to positions of power rather than becoming leaders of challenger groups. This at least is the argument of left-wing critics of schooling.[13]

An assumption buried deep within systems based on schooling and credentials is that those who do well in the

13 A classic source is Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Schooling in capitalist America: educational reform and the contradictions of economic life* (New York: Basic Books, 1976).

system are more deserving of wealth and power. This is the fundamental assumption of meritocracy — where advancement depends on ability or achievement — and applies whether or not there are flaws in the way merit is measured or achieved. Strip it back, the assumption is that a smart and talented person deserves more in life than someone who is less intelligent or less talented. Should this be obvious, be taken for granted? There are immediate exceptions: why should someone born with a serious intellectual disability receive less from society than someone born with no disability?

A different principle is "from each according to their abilities and to each according to their needs." This is an old socialist principle, quite different from meritocracy. Imagine a society in which the best and brightest, with the most challenging jobs, receive lower salaries than those facing various forms of disadvantage. Garbage collectors would receive more pay than surgeons and, in general, the more satisfying the job, the less pay it would warrant. Now apply this principle to schooling or, more generally, to learning. Children who are the most disadvantaged would receive the most care and attention, the most support to achieve their potential, while others would receive less because they need it less. In many countries, the situation is roughly the opposite: those who grow up privileged receive the most opportunities and support.

In summary, credentials are a key obstacle to deschooling: they are crucial for maintaining people's commitment to schooling. Credentials serve to justify inequality: merit, which supposedly is reflected in certifi-

cates and degrees, is the rationale for unequal outcomes in position, power and wealth.

However, deschooling is not guaranteed to lead to greater equality. If children don't attend school but instead learn with guidance from parents, mentors, learning webs and the like, then a lot will depend on access to resources provided in the community to support learning. Indeed, inequality between communities will lead to unequal outcomes even if communities are convivial, in Illich's sense.

There's no need to reach a final assessment about deschooling and inequality for a simple reason: there has been very little movement towards deschooling. Three major obstacles continue to loom large: the institutionalisation of schooling, the dominance of credentials, and the absence of a convivial society to support independent learning.

You may or may not think deschooling is a good idea, but in any case it's not happening soon. The Internet has opened up enormous capacities for learning, so schools are less essential than before, but so far this has made very little impression on schooling as a social institution. In most places, schooling is compulsory, and the inroads by homeschooling are limited. Credentials are vital for occupational success, and society remains highly unequal economically and socially.

Education is supposed to be a route for social mobility, and it is for a few, but for many others it limits their options. Would deschooling make things different? We're not likely to find out soon.

6
Feminism

In 1982, I attended a weekend workshop on nonviolent action. At the time, within the small nonviolence movement in Australia, feminist values were influential. I remember one brief exchange with two young men — younger than me — who plaintively said they couldn't think of anything positive about being a man. They had completely absorbed a woman-positive view and applied it to themselves. I tried to counter their despair by noting that some stereotypically masculine characteristics are positive, such as confidence and courage: there are worthwhile things about being a man.

Outside the nonviolence movement, feminist values were not nearly so influential, but the advances of the women's movement were significant. Back then, it was not so long since female teachers had achieved equal pay with male teachers and women working in the public service could keep their jobs after marriage. Over a period of decades, women broke one barrier after another, entering previously male-dominated occupations in ever greater numbers.

Occupational advancement is just one area. There are many dimensions to the struggle for women's equality. One I learned a lot about was sexual harassment, most of which is by men against women. It was only in the 1970s that the label "sexual harassment" was applied to a range of offen-

sive behaviours that had been prevalent for generations, usually without coordinated public condemnation. Naming led to shaming, and greater awareness led to pressure to impose rules and penalties.

However, despite efforts over several decades, sexual harassment remains a serious problem in Australia, as surveys consistently show. At the most serious end of the spectrum are rape and sexual violence, which continue, and it remains the case that most rapes are never reported to the police and when men are brought to trial, women's experience of being cross-examined is highly traumatic.

So far I've been commenting on just a few aspects of the women's movement in Australia. Internationally, the picture is far more mixed. In some countries and some areas, there have been tremendous advances whereas in others the situation for women remains dire. Contrast the success of female politicians in some countries with the continued trafficking of women for sex, an international problem.

Another complication is that referring to "feminism" or "the feminist movement" is a serious simplification. Among feminists, there are many different orientations, and different problems and goals depending on race, class and other divisions.

Next, I'll discuss two analyses of feminism, with the idea to choose one that highlights feminist advances and one that is more critical. There are a great many choices, reflecting the great diversity in feminist thinking and action.

Feminisms: a global history

While searching for a source that could give a sense of the diversity and power of what I had long thought of as "the feminist movement," I happened upon a book titled *Feminisms.* Using the plural form, feminisms, rather than the singular, feminism, indicates there is not a single unified movement but rather many different strands or varieties.

The author, Lucy Delap, is a social historian. The subtitle of her book is *A Global History.* This ambition is part of what attracted me to the book.

There are feminist movements throughout the world, in different time periods, using different methods and pursuing different goals. As Delap puts it, her book traces

> the evolution of global feminist themes that span a remarkable range of concerns: women's rights to property, education and citizenship; pacifism, anti-fascism, the welfare and protection of mothers and children; social justice, labour rights and human rights; sexual autonomy, cultural expression and reproductive rights.[1]

How on earth can anyone make sense of such a vast complexity? Delap came up with the clever idea of dividing the story into unconventional categories. Her chapters are titled dreams, ideas, spaces, objects, looks, feelings, actions and songs.

Consider the first chapter, titled "Dreams." In it, Delap considers feminist visions of their future and their desired

1 Lucy Delap, *Feminisms: a global history* (Penguin, 2020), p. 334.

goals. In covering this topic, she draws on examples from around the world, often using the stories of individuals, for example Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, a Bengali woman whose feminist utopia book *Sultana's Dream* was published in 1905, and Alexandra Kollontai, a Marxist revolutionary who played a role in the early years of the Soviet Union and whose writings presented a very different sort of feminist utopia.

In covering feminist ideas and actions across the world, Delap offers a contrast to the great volume of feminist writing by white women from Europe and North America, whose focus is mainly on this same group. A standard framework is that there are successive "waves" of feminist activity. The first wave was the suffragists in Britain and elsewhere who campaigned for the vote for women. The second wave was the US-centred women's liberation movement emerging in the 1960s, and there are various conceptions of later waves.

Delap challenges this interpretation. She tells of diverse strands of feminism, across the world, in different contexts. For example, women's struggles in India, under British rule, are something different, as are African struggles. With this global perspective, the idea of waves is less useful, because feminist thinking and actions advanced at different times and places.

Some of the stories she tells are of empowered women who did not think of themselves as feminists. It is only later that their efforts can be thought of as part of the multifaceted strands of women's efforts.

With diversity comes disagreement. Delap describes tensions that caused difficulties for women's struggles, or

sometimes just showed different priorities and approaches. For example, some forms of dress, such as face coverings expected in Muslim societies, have been assumed to be oppressive, but Delap shows that the actual situation sometimes was different. For some women, the veil "was embraced as a practice that enabled [public] organizing."[2]

Another source of tension is created by relations with other struggles. In the labour movement, women can identify as workers and support male-led campaigns. In racially divided societies, minority women can identify with the oppressed group. One tension, in some countries, is between affluent white feminists who want equal access to all occupations and women of colour who are more interested in wages and welfare, and who may identify with men of colour who are in a common struggle against discrimination.

Delap's unorthodox chapter themes offer an intriguing way to see connections between different facets of activities that might otherwise be more one-dimensional. Consider the famous women's protest camp at Greenham Common, a US military base in Britain, which continued for 19 years, radicalised huge numbers of participants and inspired activists worldwide. The Greenham protest is mentioned in Delap's chapters on objects and looks, with the longest discussion in the chapter on songs.

In her chapter titled "Actions," Delap tells about methods used by women, which include a variety of strikes, pickets and naked protests. She also tells about more violent methods, "The argument of the stone." Militant suffragists

2 Ibid., p. 215.

threw stones through the shop buildings and burned buildings. But they were always careful not to harm individuals. There is an important point here, though Delap does not emphasise it. Feminists have not resorted to armed struggle. Seldom have they formed female armies or terrorist groups, or advocated assaulting and killing rapists. Campaigners have not resorted to physical violence against men to advance women's rights, and those few women who have participated in armed struggle almost invariably have done so in support of other causes.

As is well known, nearly all collective violence, in war, terrorism, torture and organised crime, is perpetrated by men. Feminists have organised against sexual violence and, in doing so, have seldom resorted to counter-violence. When suffragists broke windows, some campaigners condemned the violence, even though it was only against physical objects. In rejecting violence, nearly all feminist movements have been "nonviolent," in the sense used to describe social action.

Delap carefully addresses many of the highly contentious issues that have divided and vexed women's struggles, laying out the arguments but usually not taking a strong stand. Race and class are regular themes: the causes and campaigns of white well-off feminists often do not resonate with working-class women, especially those of colour. There have been many internal challenges in the movement, and Delap does not have the space to dwell on any of them. For example, she devotes just a few paragraphs to the divisive contemporary issue of transgender.

Here are a few of Delap's points that stood out for me.

- A central paradox of the movement is that feminists promote women's inclusion but marginalise some women: "Black, working-class, lesbian, trans and bi-sexual, disabled, non-Western and non-Christian women" are excluded from mainstream feminism.
- Using the term patriarchy could alienate women oppressed by class, racism, slavery and colonial violence.
- During the struggle for voting for women, many companies linked their products to suffragists, some of whom were wary about marketing connections.
- Islamic feminism is important. Muslim women have both embraced and rejected veils and headscarves.
- Different emotions ("hope, anger, love, shame") highlight the paradoxes of feminisms. "Feminists have often attempted to speak for all women, yet have been inattentive to the differences between them, prompting painful feelings of exclusion and disappointment."
- In many parts of the world, feminism is seen as a Western or colonial import.
- Contemporary feminists often reject earlier ones and their goals.
- Feminists have had difficulties working with men, but cooperation with men should not be forgotten.[3]

Feminisms is a history, showing that the women's movement is not new, and was not new even in the time of the suffragists. But it is not that old either, maybe about 250 years. Delap does not set out to document or assess the

3 Ibid., pp. 5, 90–91, 154, 221, 257, 291, 291, 339.

progress towards women's emancipation and equality, but it is obvious that great strides have been made. Worldwide, feminist ideas have penetrated into every society, changing women's thoughts and actions, and affecting men as well. The movement shows no sign of disappearing. Indeed, it is going from strength to strength.

Feminisms have been transformative. Male domination was and is deeply seated in complex hierarchical societies. Against entrenched patriarchal power, women's movement writers and campaigners have led to changes in thinking and behaviour, laws and practices, that have affected billions of women and men.

However, feminist transformation has been slow and uneven. When activists join a social movement, often they hope to see major advances soon, within a few years, and many burn out from their effort. Far-sighted feminist activists have realised that the struggle can last a lifetime, and still not be over.

Delap gives a vivid sense of the many facets of women's struggles that are going on around the world and that have been going on for centuries. Her history is one of immense richness and diversity, the story of a movement that is ongoing, meeting persistent resistance and providing continued inspiration.

Feminism Seduced

In 1984, I read Hester Eisenstein's just-released book *Contemporary Feminist Thought.*[4] It is a survey of the

4 Hester Eisenstein, *Contemporary feminist thought* (London: Unwin, 1984).

development of second-wave feminist ideas, mainly in the US, focusing on the views of key writers. Her basic theme is that the development of woman-centred analysis raised the danger of retreating to a separate sphere rather than putting women's concerns on the political agenda. She said the participation of women in unchanged institutions was not viable, since changing women's place inevitably changes much else.

In the conclusion to her book, Eisenstein said feminists had three options for the road ahead. The first was agreeing to compete in the male world on its own terms. The second was withdrawing from the (male) world, creating a female retreat. The third, which she favoured, was entering the world and attempting to change it, in the image of women-centred values found at the core of feminism. To achieve this, it was necessary to forge alliances with liberatory traditions, imbuing them with woman-centred values of nurturance and intimacy.

In searching for an up-to-date analysis of feminism, I looked to see what Eisenstein had written more recently and discovered *Feminism Seduced.* It is a critique of the trajectory of the feminist movement, especially in the US, in the quarter of a century after her earlier book. There are many critical treatments of feminism from its opponents, for example from political and religious conservatives. *Feminism Seduced,* in contrast to these sorts of treatments, is a critique from within the movement, a critical examination by a long-time feminist with a continued commitment to feminist ideals.

Eisenstein focuses on the trajectory of liberal feminism, which she calls mainstream feminism, and which she

acknowledges has been highly successful. Women have broken down the sex barrier to enter just about every occupation, and they have pushed for equal wages for equal work. They are no longer relegated to household and family roles. Their power and agency are celebrated in Hollywood and the mass media. Eisenstein does not want to deny women's great gains, but argues they have come at a cost. That cost is a result of mainstream feminism being aligned with capitalist imperatives, causing harm to the working class, including the majority of women.

From the point of view of corporate leaders, whose primary goal is profit, trade unions and working-class influence are obstacles. The mainstream feminist movement pushed for equal access to jobs, undermining union power and keeping wages lower. Earlier in the 1900s, unions had pushed for the "family wage," a salary for male breadwinners large enough to support a wife and children, and many campaigners for women's welfare supported this. In the 1970s and 1980s, mainstream feminists in the US supported the Equal Rights Amendment that would allow women to compete with men for jobs, although it was opposed by women aligned with the labour movement. As mainstream feminism succeeded, working-class solidarity was broken, and working-class women were worse off.

Eisenstein presents this picture with a wealth of empirical evidence and a careful argument. She always acknowledges the advances made for middle and upper-class women and does not support a return to previous male domination. Her concern is about the way mainstream feminism became aligned with the goals of corporate

leaders, serving to subordinate the bulk of workers, including women.

In the US, the picture is always complicated by racial politics. For example, black women had always worked out of the home. With feminist advances, affluent whites outsourced domestic work, often to black women. Eisenstein says US racial divisions have weakened the feminist movement over a long period. Dominant feminist concerns, in both the liberal/bureaucratic and the radical/collective strands of the movement, did not resonate with women of colour and working-class women, with fault lines over reproductive rights, violence/imprisonment and female genital cutting. The liberalism of mainstream feminism — for example, in promoting law and order — did not serve women of colour. The US feminist movement's divisions made it harder to resist the rightward political push.

What about other countries? At the behest of financial institutions serving the interests of global corporations, Third World governments — in Africa, Central and South America, Asia and Eastern Europe — were subjected to "structural adjustment programmes" that undermined controls over working conditions, reoriented economies to export and put them in debt. These processes have been well documented as serving Western corporations. Eisenstein emphasises another consequence: they have been devastating for Third World women, who have been impoverished and subject to harsh working conditions. Their traditional lifestyles have been broken down, replaced by market relationships in which women's labour makes up for deficiencies in government provision. Many women have ended up working in export-processing zones (which might

be called worker exploitation zones), migrating to rich countries to work as domestics, or becoming sex workers.

Eisenstein also looks at the so-called War on Terror, in which mainstream feminism was used by governments as a fig leaf for imperial interventions. The continuation of the war in Afghanistan, for example, was legitimated, in part, by referring to overcoming the oppression of women.

Eisenstein's overall argument is that since the emancipatory movements of the 1960s, there has been what she calls a counterrevolution, a corporate-serving push to impose market values on all relationships. She writes,

> If we accept the idea of a global class war, then the winners to date have been the elites, the managers of the global economy across the globe, and the losers have been both the middle class and the poor. The poorest of the poor, in every country, are the women and children.[5]

The implication is that feminism needs to be part of a wider struggle, a struggle to challenge and transcend global capitalism. But how? What does feminism bring to this struggle?

Organising around gender oppression, Eisenstein says, is not enough. Corporate elites divide the working class and, as part of this, divide women from each other, with some joining management while others are cast adrift. Organising instead should aim for a cross-class alliance.

---

5 Hester Eisenstein, *Feminism seduced: how global elites use women's labor and ideas to exploit the world* (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 197.

Throughout *Feminism Seduced,* Eisenstein is a powerful exponent of socialist feminism. Yet she is quite aware of the difficulties in connecting feminists and socialists, noting the history of sexism within Marxist parties.

One final point. Throughout her analysis, Eisenstein questions the central goal of mainstream feminism in the US, what she calls the abolition of gender. The idea is that gender should be irrelevant in every part of life, from parenting to paid work, whether in politics or the military. This abolition of gender has enabled women to enter previously male domains, opening many opportunities, but it also means that qualities stereotypically associated with women, like care and compassion, are lost as women adapt to a system lacking these qualities. Eisenstein instead argues for mainstreaming, or universalising, these traditionally female values. This would require a thoroughgoing transformation of social institutions.

Assessment

There is no doubt that feminism is a powerful force in the world, so it is easy to predict that it will lead to further changes. Even in places where women are most oppressed, feminist ideas are influential, pointing to possible alternatives. Although it is possible that patriarchal values will make a global resurgence, sending women back to a previous subordinate state, this seems unlikely, especially considering how women are interconnected globally, supporting each other's struggles. Delap's history shows a tremendous diversity of feminist thought and action; returning to the past seems almost inconceivable.

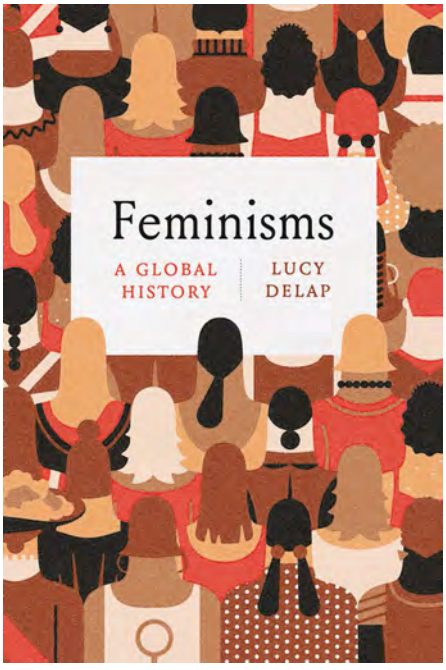
Eisenstein's analysis points to a serious limitation of liberal feminism in the US and beyond. It involves getting women into the workforce in roles provided by the capitalist system. In other words, mainstream feminism has advanced the position of women within capitalism without fundamentally transforming the capitalist system. Furthermore, although some women have gained greater economic independence, many more throughout the world have become exploited by this system.

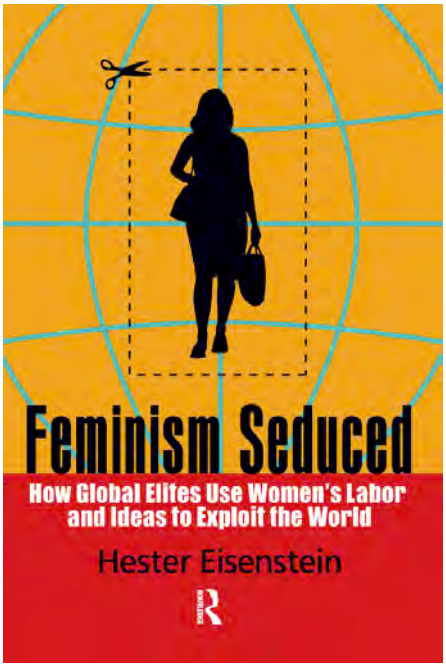
Eisenstein argues for socialist feminism, to simultaneously challenge capitalism and patriarchy. It is also possible to argue for other politicised feminisms, including radical feminism and anarchafeminism. The general insight is that feminism can mean more than enabling some women to advance within patriarchal social structures — it can mean transforming these structures.

Look at big organisations: corporations, government departments, armies, churches. Most of them are structured as bureaucracies, based on hierarchy and a division of labour, with individuals serving as replaceable cogs. Bureaucracy, as a form of organisation, is oppressive in its own way. It is undemocratic in that members, whether paid workers or volunteers, have little say in the way the organisation operates: workers do not elect their bosses. Bureaucracy thus might be said to embody patriarchal values, and a feminist challenge would be to create a different way to organise collective work, a way that embodies feminine values of caring, cooperation and compassion. This is a dramatically different vision than getting women into current bureaucratic organisations, a process in which

many women adopt traditionally masculine managerial styles.

The same sort of analysis can be applied to other domains. Sport, government, policing, media, farming: these and other areas are characterised by competition, hierarchy and inequality. A liberal feminist goal is to open all such areas to women, on an equal-opportunity basis. A more radical goal is to restructure these domains to become more cooperative and egalitarian. Furthermore, restructuring might involve something more transformative, for example replacing militaries with other ways to handle conflicts. From this perspective, feminist energies are part of a wider struggle to transform society, with values attributed to women playing a crucial role in shaping goals and methods.





7
Happiness

Growing up, I was happy most of the time but never stopped to think about it. I didn't consciously seek happiness, but rather just lived my life.

I also never stopped to think about other people being happy or sad, but instead assumed others were happy like me. I didn't realise how many people cover up their negative feelings and, as the saying goes, put on a happy face.

It was only much later that I started to learn about happiness, by reading about research and then reflecting on my experience and the people I've known. Research can be a powerful antidote to seeing the world from a narrow perspective. It made me realise that my personal experience is an unreliable guide to how other people experience the world.

Sometime in my thirties, I visited a school, I think to talk about nuclear power, and somehow ended up in a discussion with a teenager. She said, "You know, every girl in my school hates herself." I was astonished. How could it be that, among the vast numbers of young people, there was so much unhappiness, so well hidden?

Happiness research

In 1990, as part of my quest to learn more about people's emotions, I read *The Psychology of Happiness* by Michael

Argyle.[1] I learned that researchers have a simple method of finding out how happy a person is: they ask them! By asking many people over a period of time, researchers can build up a picture of self-reported happiness levels.

You might think this isn't very accurate because people lie, or they are deceiving themselves, or maybe they're feeling excited that day because they'd just been dancing, and their answer is not representative of how they usually feel. Researchers thought of this. They are measuring "subjective wellbeing," which is just how happy people think they are at the time. They also asked another question: "How satisfied are you with your life, overall?" with answers on a scale of one to seven. You might be upset right now but still think your life is good.

Even though individual self-ratings are not perfectly accurate, they still provide useful information. By asking the same person about their feelings at different times of the day, when they are doing different things, a pattern can be found, for example whether reported happiness is greater when eating versus commuting. By asking groups of people at different times, patterns can be found not only during the day but across time, for example how the average happiness in a country changes over years or decades.

It's also possible to supplement self-ratings with other information, such as smiling and brain waves. Happiness researchers are resourceful and thoughtful, just like those studying molecules or poverty.

---

1 Michael Argyle, *The psychology of happiness* (London: Methuen, 1987).

In 2002, I happened upon Martin Seligman's book *Authentic Happiness* and learned about the new field called positive psychology.[2] Then I started investigating the topic in greater depth.[3] My colleague Chris Barker, author of texts on cultural studies, was also interested in happiness, and we designed a class on the topic, initially using *Authentic Happiness* as our text. For assignments, we asked students to personally adopt a practice known to improve happiness — such as exercising, expressing gratitude or being mindful — and relate their experiences to research about the practice. It was a popular class, and stimulated Chris and me to learn more about research in the area, and write some articles together.

---

2 Martin E. P. Seligman, *Authentic happiness* (New York: Free Press, 2002).

3 Here, I draw generally on my knowledge of the field. Some of the accessible treatments that I've found valuable are Brock Bastian, *The other side of happiness: embracing a more fearless approach to living* (Allen Lane, 2018); Daniel Gilbert, *Stumbling on happiness* (New York: Knopf, 2006); Jonathan Haidt, *The happiness hypothesis: finding modern truth in ancient wisdom* (New York: Basic Books, 2006); Cassie Holmes, *Happier hour: how to beat distraction, expand your time, and focus on what matters most* (New York: Gallery Books, 2022); Sonja Lyubomirsky, *The how of happiness: a scientific approach to getting the life you want* (New York: Penguin, 2008); Sonja Lyubomirsky, *The myths of happiness: what should make you happy, but doesn't; what shouldn't make you happy, but does* (New York: Penguin, 2013); Matthieu Ricard, *Happiness: a guide to developing life's most important skill* (London: Atlantic Books, 2007).

Happier?

Are people getting happier? Are individuals happier, and are entire populations happier, on average? Answering such questions has been a preoccupation in the field. Studies have tracked how average happiness varies over a lifetime, showing it doesn't change all that much. One startling and perhaps disturbing finding is that having children tends to reduce people's happiness, which bottoms out during the children's teenage years. The good news is that older people are just as happy as younger people. Old age isn't all downhill.

Findings such as this always need to be qualified as referring to averages. There are many exceptions. Some parents of teenagers have the time of their lives, and some oldsters are miserable.

Happiness research is filled with surprises and paradoxes. I've already mentioned the distinction between moment-to-moment happiness and life satisfaction. Moment-to-moment, parents may be less happy than non-parents who are otherwise comparable, but most parents will tell you about the great joy that comes from having children.

Because people are aware of their own emotions, and see manifestations of others' emotions — from laughing to crying — they think they know a lot about the topic. Actually, according to researchers, though most people know when they are happy, they don't know very well what makes them happy.

One of the most important issues is the impact of money on happiness. Governments spend a great deal of their efforts trying to make the economy grow, and part of

the reason is that citizens want more money because they believe it will make them happier. This whole enterprise is built on a widespread misconception.

You might assume that being rich will make you happier, and it does, but only to a limited extent. Imagine winning the lottery. You should be jumping for joy, and indeed most lottery winners are ecstatic — at first. But after adjusting to their newfound wealth, their happiness declines, back to close to what it was before. This process is referred to as adaptation. Most people's happiness hovers around a "set point," not greatly affected by external circumstances such as climate, job, personal appearance and wealth. People imagine that living in a tropical paradise like Hawaii makes you happier than living in a frigid wilderness, but, other things being equal, climate has little impact.

So back to being rich versus being poor. If you are deprived, lacking income, food and shelter, you are likely to be less happy than someone who is well off. But once you have the basics, extra money makes surprisingly little difference, especially when compared with other things you can do to make yourself feel better. One way is regularly expressing gratitude by mentally giving thanks for friends, flowers, completing a challenging task and anything else that provides satisfaction. It costs nothing and takes little time yet can have a greater impact than a big jump in salary.

Some people joke that they'd rather be rich and unhappy than poor and unhappy. Maybe so, but some lottery winners become less happy, and seeking wealth can be unwise.

To get ahead financially, many people will work long hours, move away from friends and family for a better job, and endure onerous working conditions. But strangely the quest for money and possessions does remarkably little to improve happiness. This is another example of how people are mistaken about what makes them happy. Moving away from friends and family is an especially bad move, because research shows that close personal relationships are, for most people, one of the most important factors in wellbeing. People who are ambitious and materialistic are the ones most likely to sacrifice relationships to get ahead in their careers, and may end up less happy than people who prioritise job satisfaction and personal relationships. A mid-life crisis can result when people who have pursued their careers above all else finally achieve their goals and find their lives empty. They have been chasing an illusion that having nice clothes, a flashy car, an expensive house in an exclusive neighbourhood and a high-status job will bring the satisfaction they have been seeking.

Surveys of people's reported happiness levels have been taken for decades, and when averaged over an entire country offer some revealing findings. In Japan, during its economic boom after World War II, the gross national product per capita went up by a factor of six. During this time, average life satisfaction in the country went up and down a bit year to year, but overall hardly changed. In other words, the material standard of living of Japanese citizens increased enormously but they weren't any happier with

their lives than before.[4] Surveys in other countries show much the same result. On a population level, having more money and more possessions doesn't make much difference to average happiness.

At first, a new video system or a new house is exciting, but before long it becomes ordinary, just the way things are, and happiness returns to its previous level. When people continually seek more possessions in a fruitless quest, this is called the hedonic treadmill. Like walking on a treadmill, you may expend a lot of energy but never move forward.

Already I've indicated a response to the question, "Is the world getting happier?" The answer seems to be no, on average. But is there hope for the future? Can happiness researchers show ways to get off the treadmill and make actual progress? The tentative answer is yes, but only a few people are paying attention, and there are systemic obstacles.

Promoting happiness: the individual level

Let's turn to what researchers have learned about what increases people's happiness. One of the most important factors — perhaps the most important for many people — is relationships, including with family members, friends, acquaintances, co-workers, neighbours and others. Not all relationships are positive, but having close, supportive connections with others is vital.

---

4 Bruno S. Frey and Alois Stutzer, *Happiness and economics: how the economy and institutions affect well-being* (Princeton University Press, 2002), pp. 8–9.

Physical activity is the most reliable way to improve your mood.[5] You may feel uncomfortable while exercising but overall it is beneficial for mental wellbeing, and for physical health as well.

A powerful way to feel good is to help others, in small or large ways, as long as doing this is voluntary. People will take jobs that involve helping others — like teaching, nursing and public-interest law — at lower salaries than jobs lacking this aspect.

There are other ways to improve happiness, including being optimistic, mindful and forgiving, experiencing flow, savouring, avoiding social comparison and pursuing meaningful goals. An important feature about nearly every one of these is that they do not depend on possessions, status or wealth. They are about mental states and relationships with others.

Promoting happiness: the social level

Most of the research on happiness focuses on individuals, but some of those in the field look more broadly at the way society is organised.[6] Strangely, many central features of

---

5 Robert E. Thayer, *The origin of everyday moods: managing energy, tension, and stress* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

6 Robert Biswas-Diener (ed.), *Positive psychology as social change* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011); Danny Dorling, *A better politics: how government can make us happier* (London: London Publishing Partnership, 2016); Frey and Stutzer, *Happiness and economics*; Richard Layard, *Happiness: lessons from a new science* (London: Penguin, 2005).

affluent societies seem designed to make people dissatisfied, but those at the top don't want these features to change.

Inequality is bad for happiness, overall, for two main reasons. One is that an extra dollar does more for a poor person than a rich one, so society overall is better off with economic equality. Yet most countries are becoming more unequal.

The second reason is that social comparison can be a source of unhappiness. For example, one study showed that people who compare their incomes with co-workers are less happy than those who don't make comparisons, and people are less happy who more intensely make comparisons with others of their clothes, leisure activities and holiday time.[7] To some degree, keeping up with the neighbours can be more important than living comfortably.

One of my colleagues from years ago was highly conscious of appearances. He was a snappy dresser, and once or twice tried to get me to pay more attention to my own clothes. He once picked me up to drive to his place and was annoyed that I didn't comment on his new car. I hadn't noticed. What good is conspicuous consumption if no one else cares?

Given that greater economic equality is a reliable recipe for improving the population's average happiness — the gross national happiness per capita, if you like — then why haven't governments taken strong steps in this direc-

7 Arthur S. Alderson and Tally Katz-Gerro, "Compared to whom? Inequality, social comparison, and happiness in the United States," *Social Forces,* vol. 95, no. 1, September 2016, pp. 25–53.

tion? One reason is that the wealthiest people wouldn't like it, and many of them have an outsized influence on government policy. Another reason is that governments pander to people's beliefs about happiness, and most people continue to think that money, possessions and high-status careers are the road to a better life.

Since the enormous boom in what can be called the happiness industry, there has been an outpouring of commentary about wellbeing. Bhutan officially pursues happiness rather than economic growth, and some other countries have wellbeing indicators. But they haven't had much impact. Indeed, it can be said that happiness research, and happiness promoters, have had little impact on policy. That's because they focus on what individuals can do on their own, such as expressing gratitude, exercising and being mindful, without changing social arrangements.

What could be done? Greater economic equality is one thing. Another is designing buildings and towns to encourage people to engage with each other in relaxed settings. So is providing satisfying work to everyone who wants it, with "satisfying" here including participation in decision-making, challenging work tasks and cooperative relations with co-workers.

It doesn't take much to realise that things have been going in the opposite direction. Jobs are less secure, causing greater worry about the future. The widespread use of social media encourages social comparison, which makes people feel worse about themselves. The social impacts on happiness are neutralising the efforts of individuals to learn habits inspired by positive psychology.

Well, I'm not sure how many people are learning from positive psychology. Despite all the publicity about happiness, I haven't seen any research about how influential positive psychology has been, on a wide scale.

There's one other thing: critics of positive psychology. Barbara Ehrenreich, a well-known social critic, wrote a blistering critique of the positivity movement.[8] Her most potent criticism is that it serves to blame the victims of an oppressive political and economic system for their failures. Unemployed workers are encouraged to be positive, and not complain about their former employers. Ehrenreich criticises the pressure on cancer patients to be optimistic as an aid to survival, and churches that promote material success over obedience and good works to obtain salvation. Her view is that being realistic is better.

Ehrenreich's critique is useful for pointing out how happiness-promotion has been hijacked by employers to serve their own ends. However, I think her attack on positive psychology — specifically on Martin Seligman, the psychologist most influential in the field — was misguided.[9] The research in the field is not responsible for what employers are doing, and actually the research can lead in an entirely different direction. Ehrenreich's main complaints are about popular misunderstandings and misuses of ideas about happiness.

---

8 Barbara Ehrenreich, *Bright-sided: how the relentless promotion of positive thinking has undermined America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2009).

9 My comments on this are in *Doing good things better* (Sweden: Irene Publishing, 2011), pp. 90–97.

I mentioned before that research indicates that greater economic equality will improve overall happiness. The implication is that steps should be taken to bring everyone out of poverty, provide everyone with housing and a regular income, and ensure that everyone has the opportunity for satisfying work. That is a radical programme that would shake the foundations of neoliberalism.[10]

10 See "Radical happiness," *Anarcho-Syndicalist Review,* Issue #62, Summer 2014, pp. 24–30.

Assessment

Is happiness increasing? It depends. Some people are happier, some less so, but there's no evidence of systematic increases or decreases, on a population level. The economy might be growing but people's subjective wellbeing probably isn't, at least not in a sustained way.

Positive psychology is a social movement, or perhaps better thought of as the impetus for a social movement to transform the lives of individuals and the living conditions of populations. However, the movement is hamstrung in several ways. Most of the research and initiatives are aimed at individuals, encouraging forgiveness, optimism, mindfulness and the like. This is fine for those individuals able to develop habits that improve their lives, but doesn't address contrary social processes. Furthermore, happiness-promotion agendas have been taken over by employers and used to their advantage.

How many bosses do you know who say that they are pursuing people's happiness rather than sales or profits? We wouldn't expect bosses to sacrifice profits for well-being, because they're caught up in a competitive economic system that constrains them. So what about governments? They supposedly can serve the general interest and put happiness as their goal, as in Bhutan. But other governments haven't followed, and most still tout economic growth over greater equality.

It's not a happy picture!

8
IP

Imagine you're on a ship when it's raided by pirates. They don't hurt anyone or even wake the sleeping. They go to the hold and steal everything in it. You watch as they sail away with their stolen cargo. Then a crew member goes below and emerges shouting, "Everything is still here!" The pirates stole it all but, magically, it remains intact as well.

Would this taking of goods bother you? If all the cargo was food that you and the crew would be eating eventually, it might not matter. The pirates get the food too, and there's plenty for everyone. If the cargo was precious stones, that might not matter too much either, if the market was large enough so that the price of your stones wasn't affected. If the cargo was confidential information, you would worry about invasion of privacy.

This scenario came to mind after I watched a video displaying an anti-piracy warning in graphic red. Screening the video for profit, the warning said, would make me subject to severe penalties: large fines, even years in prison. What sort of piracy would this be when nothing was taken, when it was magical piracy? After all, if I show the video to some people, whoever made the original video still has it and can watch it.

The issue here is intellectual property (IP). It includes copyright, patents, trademarks, trade secrets and plant variety rights, among other areas, and applies to videos,

photos, films, books, articles, software, drugs, genetically modified organisms and much else. The basic idea is that someone created something and the idea behind their creation is protected. It is not supposed to be copied or used without permission.

The standard rationale for IP is given in the US Constitution: "To promote the Progress of Science and useful Arts, by securing for limited Times to Authors and Inventors the exclusive Right to their respective Writings and Discoveries." In other words, the purpose is to stimulate more creative production. The idea is that by giving creators control over the use of their creations, they will be stimulated to be more productive, to be more creative, thus benefiting society. Note that the rationale for IP is not about providing an income to creators, though this often occurs. It is to foster productive creation, in the arts, sciences and beyond.

Let's look at how this plays out in several domains, starting with copyright. Has IP become stronger, and who has it been helping?[1]

---

1 There is a vast body of writing about IP. Critical examinations include David Bollier, *Silent theft: the private plunder of our common wealth* (New York: Routledge, 2003); James Boyle, *Shamans, software, and spleens: law and the social construction of the information economy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); Debora J. Halbert, *Intellectual property in the information age: the politics of expanding ownership rights* (Westport, CT: Quorum Books, 1999); Christopher May, *A global political economy of intellectual property rights: the new enclosures?* (London: Routledge, 2000); Seth Shulman, *Owning the future* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999); David Vaver,

Copyright

Walt Disney was a creative businessman. In 1928, he helped to come up with the idea of Mickey Mouse, an engaging cartoon figure who helped attract audiences in the early years of cinema. However, Disney could make more money if his company was the only one allowed to use Mickey in its productions. According to law at the time, Mickey's copyright should have expired in 1984. Imagine what would have happened when Mickey was free to access: competitors would make their own cartoons, coffee mugs, t-shirts and who knows what else using Mickey's image. This might have happened if Disney had been working alone, but he became a powerful figure heading an influential company, and so he was able to use copyright law to his advantage. Well, he died in 1966, so it was his company that used IP to its advantage.

Copyright is the most expansive form of intellectual property. It covers any creation expressed in words or pictures. When you were in school and wrote an essay, as soon as you wrote it, you owned the copyright. You don't need to register a work with any authority in order to hold copyright, and it covers just about anything, including your doodles on a sheet of paper, your amateur artwork on the wall of a public toilet, and the business memos you write and receive.

When you hold copyright, it means others are not allowed to copy your work for their own creations, except with permission. If they do, this is copyright infringement,

---

"Intellectual property: the state of the art," *Law Quarterly Review,* vol. 116, October 2000, pp. 621–637.

and it's illegal. The law protects you from copycats. Except that it usually doesn't in practice. We'll come to that.

If you put enormous effort into writing a brilliant novel, you hope for some return, assuming you don't have an independent source of income. In a market society, in which you survive economically through your labour, it would be galling, perhaps impoverishing, to put years of work into a clever creation and then find someone else selling it for their benefit. As soon as you publish a few copies of your book and it starts to make a splash, some eager entrepreneur publishes the book and markets it more aggressively than you can. You might be listed as the author, but this entrepreneur, this ruthless exploiter, makes most of the money. You are left penniless — unless you are protected by the law, saved by the law of copyright.

That's the idea, anyway. The history of copyright, at least in Britain, tells a different story, one in which copyright was originally developed not for the benefit of authors, but instead publishers. Indeed, the very concept of the author, as someone who creates works out of thin air, is closely related to the rise of copyright, printing and capitalism.[2] Even today, the author is usually looked at as the central figure even though publishers reap most of the benefits.

Let's consider another issue. What can you do if someone uses your work without authorisation, who infringes your copyright? If you're a poor struggling author, not much. Enforcing the law requires money. If you're Walt

2 Mark Rose, *Authors and owners: the invention of copyright* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

Disney, with a major corporation behind you, then you can sue those who infringe your copyright over Mickey Mouse and his cartoon friends.

Several years pass, and Mickey is still bringing in lots of money. What about the rationale for copyright, to promote creative contributions as a public good? The inspiration to create Mickey is now in the past, so why is there any further need for copyright protection? Surely just a few years would do. But no, Disney and other big companies have sway. Copyright law says protection applies until the death of the creator or, in the case of commercial products like Mickey, for several decades. When, decades later, Mickey looks like entering the public domain, where he can be freely used, the US Congress extends copyright protection for another twenty years. This does not apply only to Mickey, nor is Disney the only company with influence, but cynics call this the Mickey Mouse copyright extension act.[3]

Along the way, for authors of memos or novels, copyright was extended until the death of the author, then for periods after the death of the author. It currently applies for 70 years after the death of the author. The rationale for copyright seems to have been lost in the mists of time. Think of the famous writer Virginia Woolf who was born in 1882 and died in 1941. The justification for copyright is that Woolf, knowing there would be protection of her writings, would be more prolific or more inspired. Not only that, but she supposedly would have been more productive knowing that protection would last for 70 years after she

3 In 2024, copyright for the earliest version of Mickey expired.

died rather than a mere 50 years. Never mind that she died long before these extensions of copyright.

It's absurd, but there's more. Copyright can be bought and sold, like any commercial product, so its connection with stimulating production is even more tenuous. Peter Drahos, a leading scholar in the field, says intellectual property should more appropriately be called "monopoly privilege."[4] The government grants owners a monopoly so they are protected from competition. This sounds like a good deal if you're a big-time owner like the Disney Corporation. Walt is long gone but Mickey is still a golden goose, or rather a golden mouse, that keeps on giving courtesy of an indefinitely extended restraint of trade. Another critical commentator, Lord Sydney Templeman, wrote that "the term 'intellectual property' is a pernicious fiction because it acts to disguise the creation and enforcement of monopolies which are contrary to the public interest."[5]

Back in the 1800s, US copyright law did not cover creations by non-Americans. Gilbert and Sullivan wrote highly popular musical operas, which were performed in the US without paying any royalties to the British copyright holders. After international copyright law was developed in the late 1800s, and later when US companies became the dominant beneficiaries of copyright protection, the US

---

4 Peter Drahos, *A philosophy of intellectual property* (Aldershot: Dartmouth, 1996).

5 Lord Sydney Templeman, "Intellectual property," *Journal of International Economic Law,* vol. 1, no. 4, December 1998, pp. 603–606, at p. 603. As of 2023, you could purchase 24-hour access to this four-page article for USD $52.00.

government was able to exercise its financial prowess to impose ever-stronger copyright rules and infringement penalties, for example via WIPO, the World Intellectual Property Organisation, and WTO, the World Trade Organisation.

To aid the expansionary IP regime, copyright infringement was given the scary name "piracy." Never mind that this form of piracy has no relation to the sort on the high seas.[6]

In an article about the rationale for IP, Mark Lemley notes that many studies show IP is not justifiable on utilitarian grounds, namely that it benefits society, the rationale given in the US Constitution. To justify expanding IP regimes, some defenders now use moral arguments that Lemley dismissively calls "faith-based" because they simply assume IP is a good thing.[7]

Patents

If you invent a new and nonobvious way of slicing bread, you can file a patent on it, which gives you sole rights to the invention for 20 or more years. The idea is that patent protection encourages innovation, and sometimes it does, but a more common outcome is that large companies use patents to control markets. The actual creator, the innovator, is often forgotten.

---

6 Patricia Loughlin, "'You wouldn't steal a car …': intellectual property and the language of theft," *European IP Review,* vol. 29, no. 10, October 2007, pp. 401–405.

7 Mark A. Lemley, "Faith-based intellectual property," *UCLA Law Review,* vol. 62, 2015, pp. 1328–1346.

Pharmaceutical drugs are widely used. Do you take a drug for nasal drip, high cholesterol, high blood pressure, depression, reflux or some other condition? If you're taking a brand name drug, you're probably paying extra, while the drug is under patent. After the patent expires, other companies can make the drug, and usually the price drops precipitously, because after the drug is discovered, tested and marketed, the cost of manufacturing it is minimal by comparison.

Companies like to keep their profits high, so many use a technique called evergreening. When a widely used drug is about to lose its patent protection, the company produces a similar drug, said to be new and improved, or in a different dosage, and massively markets it. Doctors are encouraged to prescribe the new drug, discrediting the older one, which just happens to have become very cheap after its patent expires.

In patent provisions, there is an escape clause. If there is a medical emergency, then "compulsory licensing" can be invoked: companies are allowed to produce generic (low-cost) versions of patented drugs, for life-saving purposes. AIDS is the most lethal new infectious disease in history, having killed tens of millions of people. In the 1990s, new drugs came on the market that enabled individuals infected with HIV, the virus responsible for AIDS, to live close to a normal life, with greatly increased life expectancy. However, despite being cheap to produce, pharmaceutical companies kept prices high to extract maximum profit. When in 1997 the South African government passed a law to allow the production of life-saving AIDS drugs at

an accessible price, the industry, backed by the US government, opposed it.

You might think patents are about rewarding the efforts of inventors, those innovators who make the economy grow and bring benefits to consumers around the world. The sad reality is that many individual inventors don't stand a chance against big companies. The companies have the legal expertise to negotiate the complexities of the law and the financial muscle to contest disputes over ownership.

Who benefits?

The primary beneficiaries of all forms of intellectual property are big companies. In the publication of books and academic articles, it is the big publishers Elsevier, Taylor & Francis, Sage and Springer. Taylor & Francis, for example, owns over 2500 scholarly journals. Academic authors write articles for no pay, and other academics provide scholarly review of submitted papers for no pay, and most editors are unpaid. In return, the copyright to the published papers is held by Taylor & Francis. If you want to see an article, even one just a few pages long, you have to pay a fee like $50. Authors have the option of paying to make their articles "open access," which means they are free to readers. This can cost several thousand dollars. So academics do all the work for free, Taylor & Francis makes money out of it, and articles are held behind paywalls indefinitely.[8]

8 On this and much else, see Sarah Lamdan, *Data cartels: the companies that control and monopolize our information* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2023).

In computing, the main beneficiaries of IP protection are the big software companies, like Microsoft. When it comes to genetically modified organisms, which can be patented, the major beneficiaries are large chemical companies like Monsanto. For filmmaking, Hollywood producers reap the biggest benefits.

Most of these benefits flow to corporations based in the US and Europe. Amazingly, the US is the only country with a significant incoming flow of IP payments. In nearly all other countries, the net flow of money is outwards, especially to the US.

Therefore, it is no surprise that the US and European governments are the most ardent advocates of strengthening IP laws, for example by insisting on this when negotiating trade agreements. Though these are sometimes referred to as *free* trade agreements, when IP is part of the package, they might better be called restraint-of-trade agreements, because they create greater controls over what can be produced and sold.

Over the years, I've talked with quite a few authors who support IP because they believe creators deserve to be rewarded. They are thinking of the royalties they receive for their books. However, it is a rare author who comes out ahead. What they don't realise is that IP is causing them to pay more for pharmaceutical drugs, software and movies — and the books they buy.

There's another curious phenomenon. When you write a book or article, and it is published commercially, copyright reduces its availability. Think of an article in an academic journal, behind a paywall. Other academics can obtain copies through their libraries, which pay subscrip-

tions to databases hosting large numbers of journals. But others, non-academics, have to pay a fee that is a large deterrent.

Is IP improving? The answer depends on whether IP, the way it presently operates, is beneficial overall, and this is a matter of debate. Here I've presented some of the arguments against expansionary IP protection, but of course advocates for IP will present contrary arguments. What is safe to say is that IP, overall, is becoming stronger and covering more industries. The duration of copyright has been repeatedly lengthened, never shortened. Patents are now allowed to apply to living things, which is new. IP has been introduced in countries around the world where it didn't apply before, and many trade agreements include strengthened IP provisions. In many ways, IP overall is stronger and more widely imposed. If we follow Peter Drahos and call it monopoly privilege, a reasonable conclusion is that the monopolists have been winning. But they don't have a free run.

Resistance

I know many amateur musicians in the classical tradition. Before the Internet, there were two main ways to obtain music: buy it or photocopy it. (In the really old days, before photocopiers, copying by hand was the alternative to buying it.) The trouble is that new music, by contemporary composers, and even ones who've been dead for several decades, is under copyright. Some friends of mine were afraid to photocopy music because there might be a raid, they would be found out, sued and lose their houses. I assumed this would never happen, and it never did, but the

fear was real. The result is that many amateur musicians mainly played works by the likes of Mozart, Beethoven and Brahms, because they are out of copyright. Ironically, the law to protect the rights of contemporary composers means fewer musicians play their works.

However, it was so easy and convenient to photocopy sheet music, with the cost far less than buying originals, that lots of musicians made copies for their own use, despite strict warnings printed on the first page. The same thing happened more generally. Photocopiers made it easy to make copies, and the cost of enforcement was too large to make it worthwhile except in a few cases in which large numbers of copies were made for commercial resale. When a law is widely violated, it loses its credibility. That has happened repeatedly with IP law.

Decades ago, when people used videorecorders, it was common practice to record television programmes so they could be watched at a later time. Just about everyone with the technology did this, but it was illegal, a violation of copyright. Many people didn't even know about the law, and those who did treated it with contempt: they flouted it. When, in this context, if a law is enforced, with a few individuals singled out, this is seen as unfair.

Next came video downloads of movies. Rather than pay, it became attractive to find a website hosting the movie. Movie producers cried foul: "This is piracy." Even more common was downloading songs, also illegal. What to do? One response was scary warnings about piracy. Another response was to prosecute. When a few individuals were picked out and sued for large amounts, it caused a backlash against the industry, especially when those sued

included older people whose grandchildren were doing the downloading.[9]

Overall, the ease of copying has meant IP owners have had to adopt new tactics to extract money from their monopolies. Apple found a way to continue making profits from recorded music, by making downloads cheap enough that paying and doing it legally was more attractive.

One of the most powerful challenges to the usual function of IP is free and open source software (FOSS).[10] In most cases, the source code for this software is available for anyone to inspect, and in this sense is "open." Richard Stallman is a key figure. He came up with the idea of setting up rules for software so no one else could take control of it, in essence using copyright law to ensure that no one could monopolise code. This is not the abolition of IP but rather a clever use of it so it cannot serve as monopoly privilege.

The results have been spectacular. You can now obtain free versions of word processors like Word and spreadsheets like Excel. Major FOSS platforms like the operating

---

9 Brian Martin, Chris Moore and Colin Salter, "Sharing music files: tactics of a challenge to the industry," *First Monday,* vol. 15, no. 12, 6 December 2010.

10 Glyn Moody, *Rebel code: Linux and the open source revolution (*New York: Perseus Books, 2002); Christopher Tozzi, *For fun and profit: a history of the free and open source software revolution* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017); Steven Weber, *The success of open source* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004). The differences between free and open source software, and the disagreements among their respective supporters, are not central to the discussion here.

system Linux often perform as well as or better than proprietary alternatives.

Christopher Tozzi writes, "Today FOSS reigns supreme and is popular across the entire technology world. It has become the de facto mode of producing, distributing, and using software for hundreds of millions of people."[11]

Why does FOSS work so well? A key factor is that the code is available for anyone to see, which means programmers can examine it and find ways to improve it. This is not true of Microsoft Word and Excel, which cannot be inspected, so shortcomings are not subject to the same level of scrutiny.

Why do programmers feel so passionately about FOSS? Having access to the source code — even if they never modify programs — gives a reassuring feeling of independence.[12]

Freely available information is said to be in the public domain, also called the commons. Most uses of IP remove things from the public domain, by restricting availability. FOSS, based on a very different use of IP rules, is one way to contribute to the commons.

The open-source idea has spread beyond software, so now there are, for example, open-source colas that, unlike Coke and Pepsi, provide full details of their recipes, which can be shared. For books, articles and other written works, creators can relinquish conventional copyright of their works through alternatives such as the one applying to this book, Creative Commons. This means you are welcome to

11 Tozzi, p. 242.

12 Ibid., p. 13.

make copies and share them, but not to prevent others from doing the same. For me, this makes much more sense than imagining that the usual form of copyright for 70 years after I die will make me more productive today. This thought brings into relief the absurdity of the official rationale for copyright extended to the distant future.

Another challenge to IP is the open access movement, which aims to make all scholarly publications available free. However, pressure by and on academics to make their work available without charge threatened publishers' business model. What if academics took the initiative to choose open-access journals, perhaps with the added incentive of pressure from research funding bodies? Taylor & Francis, and other big publishers of academic journals, responded by offering open access to articles in their own journals, except that you, or your employer, have to pay dearly for it. Some academics make their works freely available by putting them in digital repositories or on their own websites. There is an ongoing struggle between IP owners and the supporters of open access.

Conclusion

Intellectual property is, for powerful companies, a wonderful thing. It protects a monopoly for as long as IP applies, and this can be for a long time indeed. Imagine, an indefinitely long monopoly, allowing you to charge as much as you can get away with, with no competition. It seems paradoxical that this sort of system developed and expanded so much since the 1980s during a period in which the rhetoric of neoliberalism has been to cut back on government controls and leave things to the market. IP is the epitome of

government control to protect monopolies and restrict an open market.

Has IP been getting stronger? Undoubtedly. It applies to ever more domains, from books and movies to software, photographs, inventions, drugs and genetically modified organisms. Furthermore, IP has been internationalised, with strong protections applying throughout most of the world. The profits associated with IP have expanded enormously, which is better for the big owners but worse for nearly everyone else.

However, there has been resistance to the rise of an IP-based economy. Many people simply flout the law, and when this becomes widespread, there is little IP owners can do about it. This has pushed IP owners to develop new ways of monetising their monopoly privilege. Beyond this, innovators and campaigners have created and promoted alternatives, like free software and creative commons, that expand the commons of human products for all to use. This seems to be the most promising challenge to IP as monopoly privilege, yet there is a long way to go.[13] Meanwhile, when you see a warning against engaging in piracy, remember that it's not like on the high seas — it's magical piracy.

13 Tozzi writes, "… it is hard to argue that the FOSS revolution is over. Instead, like the major political revolutions that preceded it, the FOSS revolution has entered a phase in which the meanings and end goals of the FOSS movement are subject to continual debate and reinterpretation within different strands of the FOSS community" (Ibid., p. 273).

9
Mental health

The email was from Alex. He said he was being constantly harassed, electronically. He couldn't escape. He provided a link to work on gangstalking — systematic targeted harassment — to show that what he was experiencing was not just imagined.

Alex wasn't the first person to contact me with a story of being harassed or persecuted through some unusual means, electronic or maybe chemical, even a brain implant. I would get such messages every year or so, and eventually decided to write a short comment about what to do and put it on my website.[1]

I assumed Alex was genuinely in fear and pain, but not due to harassment. It was probably in his mind. However, because I'm not a psychiatrist and Alex and the others are not my patients, I shouldn't be making judgements about whether or not they have a mental illness.

So why was Alex contacting me? Maybe it was because I've written about sexual harassment, bullying and

---

1 I laid out three main strategies. The first is to collect enough documentation to convince others that harassment is involved. If that isn't feasible, the second strategy is to take a trip away from home. If the harassment continues while away, the third strategy is to live with it. See "I'm being harassed. What should I do?", https://www.bmartin.cc/dissent/documents/harassment.html

whistleblowing. He was looking for someone to take his concerns seriously and help him counter the harassment.

Another reason Alex may have contacted me is because of my connection with Steve Wright, who did research on the "technology of repression," including electroshock weapons, microwave beams and other non-lethal weapons and methods of surveillance. As a result of his investigations, numerous people contacted Steve about their experiences of being harassed. He dismissively called them "wavies," because of their delusions about being subject to electromagnetic-wave attacks.

It is easy to say these individuals have a mental illness, though this is judgemental. And how would anyone know whether they do? There are usually no observable signs, for example of abnormalities in the brain. Assessments are mostly based on behaviour, on what people say and do. If they believe they are being harassed but there's no evidence to support this belief, then it's easy to say they must be delusional or paranoid: they believe in things for which there is no physical evidence.

However, not everyone with beliefs that can't be independently proved is deemed mentally ill. An obvious example is belief in God, in a deity, who isn't physically present in the world but who is believed to listen to supplications and sometimes intervene. Believers are not said to be mentally ill, so perhaps a crucial factor is whether a person's belief is culturally acceptable. It is one thing to subscribe to widespread beliefs and quite another to hold beliefs that most others think are crazy. Deciding whether or not a person should be called delusional or paranoid involves making a judgement about whether their beliefs

are credible or acceptable, a judgement made by psychiatrists, family members or others.

Is mental health getting better or worse? According to several measures, in many countries, mental problems are becoming more commonplace. For official data, I looked up the World Health Organisation's website and found a link to a database called the Global Burden of Disease. After registering, you can find all sorts of information, including about mental disorders. One metric is disability-adjusted life year or DALY, a measure of the impact of disease on people's lives taking into account both disability and early death. I searched the database for DALYs for mental disorders from 1990 to 2019, for the whole world and all ages. In 1990, mental disorders comprised just over 3% of the health burden from all diseases. By 2019, this had increased to just under 5%. There's a margin for error in each figure, but it seems like a big increase.[2] Depressive disorders have the biggest impact, followed by anxiety disorders and schizophrenia.

Three interpretations

Richard Gosden was an unusual student. In one undergraduate class, he handed in his essay early — six weeks early! I was astounded. It was good, too.

Starting his PhD, Richard arrived with a one-page diagram showing his analysis, and then he followed through by completing his thesis in record time, following the plan

2 Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME), Global Burden of Disease Study 2019 (GBD 2019) Results, https://vizhub.healthdata.org/gbd-results/, 2020.

in the diagram. His thesis was on explaining schizophrenia, a mental illness in which patients seem to live in a different reality, believing things about the world at variance with everyone else's perceptions.

One way of explaining schizophrenia is the biomedical model. Dysfunctions in the brain cause the problems, and these dysfunctions can be due to heredity or the environment or both. Despite the shortcoming that no one has ever been able to detect any brain abnormalities that can be used to identify schizophrenics, the biomedical model is dominant in the mental health field. Treatment, most commonly, is by drugs to change the brain's operation. Unfortunately, many of the standard drugs have undesirable side effects.

There is another explanation, which itself can seem crazy. It is that mental illness — all sorts, not just schizophrenia — doesn't exist. The psychiatrist Thomas Szasz is by far the most prominent advocate of this view, called the myth of mental illness. Szasz's idea is that there is nothing organically wrong with people who are said to be mentally ill. Instead, they are just reacting to their environment. Szasz said that people who have strange beliefs or who behave strangely are just people with strange beliefs and behaviour. Applying the label "mental illness" doesn't help.[3]

Richard introduced a third model, which he called mystical. Rather than treating schizophrenia as a medical disorder or as a stigmatising label, it could be thought of as a different way of experiencing reality, one offering

3 Thomas S. Szasz, *Schizophrenia: the sacred symbol of psychiatry* (Syracuse University Press, 1988).

otherwise unavailable insights and visions. This might be called becoming a seer or gaining transcendent wisdom.

Each model of schizophrenia guides the reactions of others. For those using the biomedical model, schizophrenics need to be helped with therapies to change the way they think and behave. For those using the myth-of-mental-illness model, schizophrenics shouldn't be treated any differently than anyone else; if, occasionally, they behave dangerously, that's a matter for police and legal authorities, not doctors. For those using the mystical model, schizophrenics might be prized for their unorthodox visions.

Richard wrote a book based on his PhD thesis, titled *Punishing the Patient.* The title refers to one of his main concerns: drug treatments for schizophrenia can serve as a form of punishment. You had better behave like everyone else, and if you don't, we'll drug you until you do.[4]

An exhaustive critique

A few years after Richard graduated, I took on another outstanding PhD student. Melissa already knew her topic well through years of university teaching in the area. She was a perfectionist. Every piece of writing she gave me was carefully argued, exhaustively referenced and written so well that I was lucky to find a stray comma. Even on a topic I knew well, whistleblowing, I had nothing to suggest for improvement. My main role was to encourage Melissa to show me her work.

---

4 Richard Gosden, *Punishing the patient: how psychiatrists misunderstand and mistreat schizophrenia* (Melbourne: Scribe, 2001).

Melissa's topic was depression and antidepressants. She examined the arguments used to justify the massive expansion in the number of prescriptions for antidepressants in Australia and beyond, and found them wanting. When I say "examined the arguments," this means she catalogued every argument she could find and scrutinised each one, with extensive referencing to back up her assessments.

Melissa did not dispute that some people have severe depression and may be helped by antidepressants. Her focus was on the way that ordinary distress had been turned into a medical condition for which a pharmacological intervention was the recommended solution. The following extract from her thesis abstract gives an indication of her argument.

> In Australia and most developed countries, […] a strong orthodoxy has developed that depression is common, serious, and treatable, and that the appropriate treatment is antidepressants. […]
>
> The orthodox story has been promoted by many players, including psychiatrists, pharmaceutical companies, marketing companies, health professional organisations, consumer organisations, governments and government agencies, and the media. […]
>
> Key players have strongly promoted the orthodox story, despite contrary evidence, systematically exaggerating the prevalence and severity of depression and the effectiveness and safety of antidepressants for both depression and suicide prevention. Pharmaceutical companies have played a key role in the establishment

> and maintenance of the orthodoxy, skilfully recruiting other players to their cause.
>
> […] depression has been reified and marketed as an all-purpose explanation for distress. As well as exposing many thousands of people to adverse effects of antidepressants, this has deflected attention from social determinants of well-being.[5]

Melissa's thesis was extremely long, detailed and scholarly. Despite this, it became an online hit. All theses at the University of Wollongong are posted online after the students graduate. Without any publicity or promotion, Melissa's thesis was downloaded more than 10,000 times, far more than most other theses.

Melissa's argument points to a possible shortcoming in the usual statistics for depression, the most frequently diagnosed mental illness. Maybe the figures are inflated due to what Melissa calls "key players," especially psychiatrists and mental-health organisations like Beyond Blue in Australia.

Mental illness or social dysfunction?

Richard's examination of schizophrenia and Melissa's examination of depression point to an issue that bedevils the entire field. Is mental illness — depression, anxiety, phobias and so on — a problem with the individual, or is

---

5 Melissa Raven, *Depression and antidepressants in Australia and beyond — a critical public health analysis.* Doctor of Philosophy thesis, Faculty of Arts, University of Wollongong, 2012. https://ro.uow.edu.au/theses/3686

the problem with society? In other words, is it possible that what we call mental illness is a normal reaction to a dysfunctional society, workplace or family, basically a normal reaction to one's life experiences?

In some cases, this is recognised. People who go through horrific experiences — for example soldiers in front-line combat, victims of torture, and victims of ongoing domestic violence — can break down. During World War I, soldiers who succumbed were said to be suffering from shell shock, and they were blamed for it. Now there is a new label: post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD.

An everyday example is depression. If you're feeling really sad, perhaps there's a reason. Maybe someone close to you is ill, or has recently died, or treated you badly. Is feeling down in the dumps, for extended periods, a mental illness that needs to be treated? Should you be taking antidepressants? Is the problem in your brain?

The usual answer, in affluent countries, is that you should see a doctor. If you do, most commonly you'll be prescribed an antidepressant. If you have plenty of money, maybe you'll see a therapist to talk things over. In either case, the assumption is that the problem is with you, and that you need to adapt. In societies with high levels of individualism, people are expected to address their health problems alone, without taking into account the wider social environment.

For a different perspective, I turned to two books by British writers.

Lost connections

Johann Hari wrote a powerful account of the war on drugs titled *Chasing the Scream.* I was so taken by it that I obtained his next book, *Lost Connections.* It is a wonderful account of Hari's personal experiences of suffering from depression and his search for answers to what it's all about by talking with leading experts around the globe. His main argument is that the biological explanation for depression is flawed and that the source of the problem is in society: the way work, personal relations, goals and incentives are organised.[6]

Hari weaves his personal story with his interviews and interpretations of research. The second main part of the book is about sources of depression, which all involve disconnection: from work, other people, meaningful values, childhood safety, respect, the natural world and a secure future. These seven disconnections are in separate chapters. Then Hari addresses the role of genetics and brain function.

The third main part is about reconnection, to communities, other people, meaningful work, meaningful values, sympathetic joy, overcoming childhood trauma, and a secure future. Hari emphasises that no one can do all this alone. Social change is required.

Hari's recommendations, presented via examples of restorative social arrangements, are radical, though without the usual accompanying rhetoric. They include community control, workers' control, rejection of materialism, and mutual aid. *Lost Connections* provides a stunning indictment

6 Johann Hari, *Lost connections: why you're depressed and how to find hope* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

of contemporary political and economic arrangements and hope for a different sort of future.

Hari cites evidence that negative events and ongoing stress each make depression more likely, and together they are synergistically damaging. One source of stress is loneliness, which is an inner feeling, not necessarily related to being separated from people. For example, one study showed that more sociable people are much less likely to catch colds, which suggests loneliness weakens the immune system.[7] There's evidence that loneliness causes depression and anxiety.

So, what should you do if you're lonely? Hari says you need other people and to interact with them, doing something meaningful.

Another factor is materialism, encouraged by ubiquitous advertising with the underlying message that buying leads to happiness. Materialistic people join the quest for status and happiness by acquiring possessions, if possible ones more impressive than their peers' possessions. They seek to rise in occupational hierarchies, partly to make more money and partly because of the status. Here's a paradox: materialistic people are more likely to be depressed. Acquiring possessions, money and status does not provide the connections needed for good mental functioning.[8]

There is a vast amount of research on drugs and other biomedical interventions, despite their limited effective-

7 Sheldon Cohen et al., "Sociability and susceptibility to the common cold," *Psychological Science,* vol. 14, no. 5, 2003, pp. 389–395. Hari's book has 50 pages of references.

8 See the chapter on happiness.

ness. There is much less research on social causes and hardly any on reconnection. For example, exposure to nature is therapeutic, but research funding to study this is scarce because there's no money in it. Hari notes that selling drugs makes money whereas prescribing social connections doesn't.

Workplaces are crucibles for mental functioning. When you feel controlled like a meaningless cog, lack recognition for good work, and feel low on the hierarchy, work can be debilitating. Yet, says Hari, it's impossible to obtain funding to study mental health in democratic workplaces. Why not? Because the answer might suggest changing the way work is organised, and bosses and owners wouldn't like this.[9]

Hari, through his quest for answers, concluded that distress is a rational response to the environment. The US is a highly individualised society, so people tend to search for individual solutions, and drugs fit the bill whereas fostering personal connections does not. Hari says people in the US who try to be happier won't be, whereas those in Russia, Japan and Taiwan will be, because these societies enable collective ways of thinking. Hari says depression is a collective problem, so it can't be solved with separate changes by individuals.

Hari offers some suggestions. For example, when you're feeling bad, you should try to focus on how others are feeling and how to help them and help society. Ultimately, though, the remedy for mental health is to

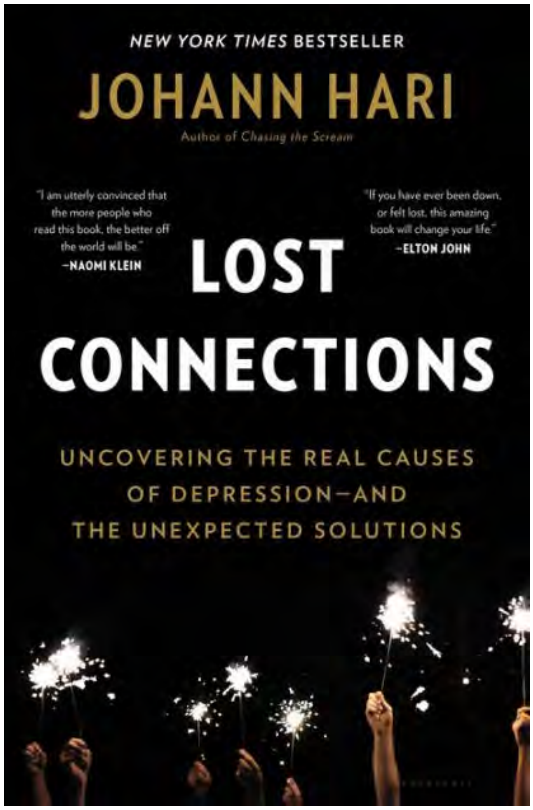
9 See the chapter on work.

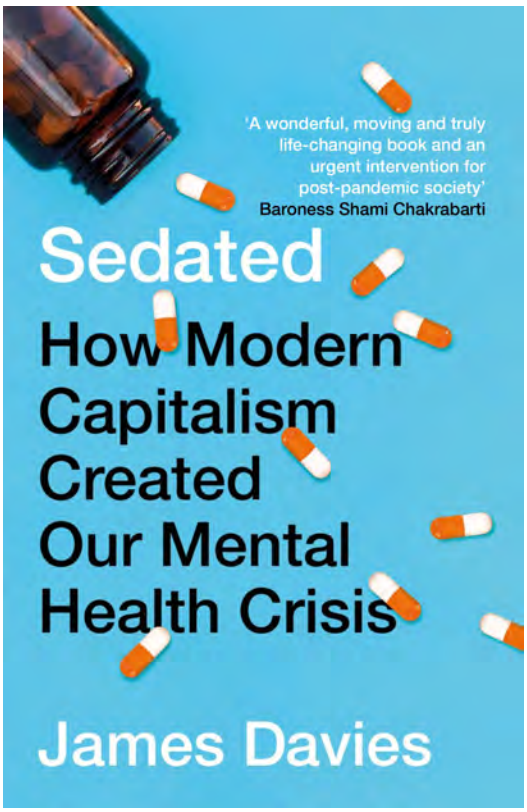
change society, to give people more control over their own lives, to find satisfaction in relationships.

In his concluding chapter, Hari reflects on himself as a teenager entering a pharmacy:

> I started to wonder what I would say now — after all I had learned — to that teenage version of myself, if I could go back in time and talk with him before he swallowed that first pill on this spot.
>
> I would try, I hope, to tell that teenager a story about his distress that was more honest. What they've been telling you up to now is false, I'd say. That doesn't mean all chemical antidepressants are bad: some credible scientists argue they give some temporary relief to a minority of users, and that shouldn't be dismissed. The false story is the claim that depression is caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain and that the primary solution for most people is a chemical antidepressant. That story has made Big Pharma over $100 billion, which is one of the crucial reasons why it persists.
>
> The real story, I would explain, has been known to scientists for decades. Depression and anxiety have three kinds of causes — biological, psychological, and social. They are all real, and none of these three can be described by something as crude as the idea of a chemical imbalance. The social and psychological causes have been ignored for a long time, even though it

seems the biological causes don't even kick in without them.[10]





Sedated

James Davies is a psychotherapist and an academic at the University of Roehampton. His book *Sedated* is a stinging critique of the dominant approach to mental illness. He argues that most mental health problems derive from the way society is organised, namely breaking down relationships, offering soul-destroying work, making work precarious, etc. The solution is pharmaceutical and individualis-

10 Ibid., pp. 311–312.

tic: blame the individual and treat them, which is profitable as well as preserving the system.

Davies provides his analysis in a reader-friendly way, telling of his meetings with various experts and offering illustrative stories. This provides a powerful indictment of the dominant approach to mental illness.

One feature of the contemporary British scene is the spread of wellness services, paid for by employers to help workers. This sounds caring, but Davies sees something different.

> The whole business model of workplace mental health consultancies, in other words, fundamentally rests on a message that organisations will happily pay for: one that favours back-to-work policies and exonerates working conditions, while at the same time enabling organisations (and the government that helps fund these programmes) to declare sanctimoniously that they are tackling poor mental health.[11]

There is no evidence that these consultancies are effective, but they do assert a narrative. According to Davies,

> By removing difficult work experiences from the domain of public discussion, and placing them into the private domain of the consultancy room, the negative effects of modern work can be medicalised, individu-

11 James Davies, *Sedated: how modern capitalism created our mental health crisis* (London: Atlantic Books, 2022), p. 95.

> alised and depoliticised and thus more safely, quietly and confidentially diffused.[12]

Davies notes that work, when it is secure, meaningful and interesting, is good for mental health. But, he argues, trying to get people back in jobs when the work is insecure, pointless and unengaging should not be the goal of wellness programmes. Davies criticises back-to-work training that conceptualises unemployment as a psychological problem, assuming people's thinking needs to be fixed. This avoids dealing with the sources of distress, which are in society, not in individuals.

Davies argues that the deregulation of the UK pharmaceutical industry has led to overprescribing of drugs despite their limited effectiveness, so one-quarter of UK adults are now prescribed a psychiatric drug each year. He traces this development to neoliberal ideology.

Davies refers to the ideas of Erich Fromm, one of my favourite authors when I was a teenager. Fromm says people believe that by acquiring possessions — objects, status symbols, friends — they become more valuable as people.[13] Davies also cites the work of Tim Kasser who, like Fromm, sees materialism as compensation for neglected needs. The trouble is that materialism undermines emotional health and relationships. The rise of neoliberalism

---

12 Ibid., p. 103.

13 For example, Erich Fromm, *To have or to be?* (Harper & Row, 1976).

> enabled the assertion of a new vision of self, aligning with a novel kind of mental health paradigm that served high materialism, consumption, commodification and the fetishisation of economic productivity. As this new vision began reshaping mental health ideology, depoliticising interventions (chemical and cognitive) gained unprecedented governmental support, while pharmaceutical interests thrived through deregulation, and humanistic therapies were progressively devalued or decommissioned (they promoted the wrong kind of productivity, after all).[14]

Davies examines four obstacles to mental health reform: biased research, the power of big pharma, the biomedical approach, and neoliberalism that promotes medicalised, individualistic approaches. However, the alignment of what Davies calls "new capitalism" with individualised mental health approaches was not due to plotting. Instead, the mental health system adapted to the economic and political system in ways that enabled it to survive and flourish, following the path of least resistance within neoliberalism.

> Whether we are looking at the medicalisation of worker dissatisfaction, at the rise of back-to-work therapies, at the alignment of materialistic values and treatments, at the pathologisation of the unemployed, at recovery being measured in terms of economic productivity, at pharmaceutical regulation that puts industry interests first, at the use of diagnostic labels

14 Davies, *Sedated,* p. 279.

> to plug school funding cuts, or at the widespread commodification and depoliticisation of mental distress, we are referring to a system that has become handmaiden to the ideological needs and wants of new capitalism.[15]

Conclusion

By most conventional measures, mental health problems have been getting worse over the past half-century. A greater proportion of the population is diagnosed with depression, anxiety and other mental disorders. That part of the issue is straightforward. What is not so obvious, and is contested, is what this means and what to do about it.

Thomas Szasz argued that mental illness is a myth, so perhaps from his point of view, what's happening is ever more labelling of people's thoughts and behaviours as reflecting an illness. But maybe he would agree that more people are depressed, anxious and otherwise not functioning as well as they might.

Another issue is overdiagnosis. Maybe people are operating much the same as before, on average, but are now more likely to be diagnosed with a mental problem, and most commonly given a drug to fix it. This would fit with Melissa's examination of depression and antidepressants.

Then there's the idea that the problem is with what's happening in society. Johann Hari, with a lifelong battle with depression, concluded that many people aren't coping in their lives, but the real driver is a society that offers less human connection, less purpose, less community. From this

15 Ibid., pp. 332–333.

perspective, the important change in the past half-century, and beyond, is the breakdown of community. Individuals are now more free of the constraints of family, neighbourhoods and occupations, which is fine for some but disorienting and distressful for many, who now lack the social anchors that previously were more available.

The radical transformation of society causing community breakdown is caused, in large part, by economic systems based on competition, self-interest and consumerism. People are encouraged to pursue individualistic material goals — jobs, possessions, status and fame — but this often comes at the price of less satisfaction with life.

James Davies argues that this process has a vicious twist. Precarious work is distressing, but rather than identifying and blaming the economic system, the problem is blamed on the individual, who is treated medically, often with drugs sold at a profit, thereby completing the cycle.

In one way, these different perspectives are in agreement: ever more people are being diagnosed as being depressed, anxious and/or delusional. Where they differ is in explaining what's going on, and in saying what should be done about it.

Postscript 1

My friend and colleague Paula Arvela has done volunteer work for Lifeline in Australia, which provides crisis support and suicide prevention services. After reading a draft of this chapter, she offered these comments.

After reading this piece, I was left with the sense that unless the "system" is changed, nothing will happen for the better.

Yet, the system is so deeply entrenched that any changes are hard to foresee, perhaps indicating that meaningful developments won't be occurring any time soon. Meanwhile, what will happen to those who feel distressed/anxious/depressed/hopeless and suicidal? Whether the problem is medical or societal — and I do agree with the societal argument — these individuals feel they are "hurting." What can we, as a society, do? Can we do anything to make the world better for those who are labelled as having a "mental illness"?

Postscript 2

Richard Eckersley researches and writes on culture, progress, wellbeing and the future. We have corresponded for quite a few years. He offered the following commentary.

The lives of young people provide the best window into our times because they are growing up in them, deciding who they are, what they want, and where they fit. They are open to opportunities and vulnerable to the costs. Their health is an important predictor of future population health because many of the attitudes and behaviours — and even the illnesses — that determine adult health have their origins in early life.

For example, about three out of four mental-health problems begin before age 25. While some of these mental disorders are minor and transient, other problems can be severe and recur throughout life. Increases in poor mental health in younger age groups are now affecting adults in their prime.

So young people's mental health is a key measure of whether life is getting better.

I began exploring young people's health and wellbeing in the 1980s, when youth suicide, drug abuse and crime were causing concern. I recently updated my work on youth in an

essay for the American magazine *Salon*, on which this commentary is based.[16]

Research shows that rates of mental illness, especially anxiety and depression, have risen in many Western countries. But the topic remains contentious. Critics have claimed reported increases might result from a greater willingness to admit to problems; increased diagnosis and the "medicalisation" of normal human emotions; or changing attitudes to, and greater awareness of, the problems associated with "being young."

My approach has been based on several lines of research: evidence of increased rates of mental illness among young people over time; evidence that youth have higher rates of mental disorder than older age groups; widespread expert concern about young people's health and wellbeing; surveys of the perceptions and attitudes of the public, parents and young people themselves; and evidence on explanatory factors and their trends, which predict a deterioration in health and wellbeing.

Taken together, the evidence presents a compelling picture of increased and widespread psychological problems in young people. Nevertheless, what is driving these trends remains unclear, with a current focus being on social media. My view is that we are seeing a complex interaction of many influences, with many possible pathways between causes and effects. These influences include changes in diet, physical activity and sleep, through changes in the family, education, technology and media, to broad cultural change, especially rising individualism and materialism.

16 Richard Eckersley, "More young people are struggling and there is no quick fix. Why being young is getting worse," *Salon,* 16 September 2023.

I believe the roots of the problem are deeply existential and relational, about how people think of life and how they see themselves in relation to others and the world, and this profoundly affects their wellbeing.

Rising materialism and individualism are defining characteristics of modern Western culture. The 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 disadvantage and privilege; a surfeit or excess of freedom and choice, which is experienced as a threat or tyranny; the confusion of autonomy with independence; and a shift from intrinsic to extrinsic values and goals. An intrinsic orientation means doing things for their own sake. Intrinsic goals tend to meet basic human needs for competence, affiliation and autonomy. They are “self–transcending” and good for wellbeing. An extrinsic orientation means doing things in the hope or expectation of other rewards, such as status, money and recognition. It is “self-enhancing” in the sense of being concerned with self-image. It is not good for wellbeing.

Young people should be the main beneficiaries of progress; conversely, they will pay the greatest price of any long-term economic, social, cultural or environmental decline and degradation. If young people’s health and wellbeing are not improving, it is hard to argue that overall life is getting better.

10
Nuclear power

Imagine a parallel universe in which the Earth's energy system is built around nuclear power. Tens of thousands of huge nuclear power plants provide most of the electricity used in the world, and electricity is a large component of total energy. After power plants have finished their working lives, their fuel rods are chemically processed to extract plutonium, and there are hundreds of these reprocessing plants. The extracted plutonium is then used as a fuel to produce power in so-called fast reactors. This is the world as once imagined by nuclear proponents.

A few other things should be mentioned. Major nuclear accidents are expected nearly every year. There is a giant nuclear security force to prevent terrorism and clamp down on opposition to nuclear developments. Dozens of countries have the capacity to make nuclear weapons in a short time, and when wars break out, people worry that a power plant might be targeted or, even worse, a reprocessing plant, with enough radioactive material released to make Chernobyl and Fukushima seem like warm-ups for the real thing. This is the world feared by nuclear opponents.

Back to reality. In 1976, I moved to Canberra and became active in the local Friends of the Earth group. FOE campaigned on many environmental issues, for example whaling and forestry, but at that time the main focus was on

uranium mining and nuclear power. Australia has large uranium reserves but there were no plans to build nuclear power plants, hence the attention to uranium. One of our slogans, on stickers and banners, was "Leave uranium in the ground!"

I immediately began joining activities, for example writing letters to the newspaper, writing leaflets, giving talks and helping organise rallies. I was active on the anti-nuclear-power issue for a decade, learned a great deal about the issues, and have followed them ever since.

Uranium mining is just one part of what's known as the nuclear fuel cycle. After mining, uranium is processed, enriched and used in power plants to generate electricity. After a power plant stops operating, the remaining fuel, called spent fuel, can be reprocessed (chemically treated) to extract plutonium, and then the remaining radioactive waste has to be disposed of. Reprocessing, however, has never become commercial; the alternative is to dispose of the spent fuel or, as nuclear proponents say, "managed."

The proponents' case for nuclear power is straightforward: they claim it is a cheap, clean and safe way to provide large amounts of reliable electricity. In the 1970s, the fear was that fossil fuels — coal, oil, natural gas — would run out: an energy shortage. Nuclear power was needed to ensure an ever-expanding energy supply.

For those of us in FOE, the case against nuclear power was multi-faceted. In the popular mind, the greatest problems are nuclear reactor accidents and the disposal of long-lived radioactive waste. Because Australia's main role in the nuclear fuel cycle was providing uranium, two other issues were prominent: the mining of uranium on Aborigi-

nal land and the role of nuclear facilities in enabling more countries to acquire nuclear weapons. The chain reactions in the core of nuclear power plants are also the basis for nuclear explosions. Nuclear explosives can be made using either uranium enriched beyond the level needed for nuclear reactors or plutonium obtained by chemically reprocessing spent fuel from reactors.

Indeed, nuclear power was a child of the nuclear weapons programme. Famously, during World War II, the US military developed atomic bombs and dropped two of them on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945. It was only later, in the 1950s, that the same basic process of nuclear fission was repurposed, in a controlled fashion, for generating electricity. This historical connection between the bomb and the power plant remained important. The same skills — nuclear science and engineering — and facilities used for nuclear power production could be turned to making weapons. That's what happened in several countries. I learned that key figures promoting nuclear power in Australia wanted it so a bomb could be made if desired.[1]

Personally, my biggest concern about nuclear power was never about accidents or radioactive waste — they are important, to be sure — but about political impacts. Because of the risk of catastrophic accidents, the possibility of criminal uses of nuclear materials and the danger of terrorist attacks, nuclear facilities need to be guarded against threats, and this includes surveillance and disruption of anti-nuclear groups, indeed anyone who challenges nuclear priorities.

1 Brian Martin, *Nuclear knights* (Canberra: Rupert Public Interest Movement, 1980).

An energy system built around plutonium production would not only be dangerous to life; it would compromise political freedom. Energy efficiency and small-scale wind and solar power pose no such threats to civil liberties.

Thus, for me, the nuclear power project was a political nightmare, a way of instituting and cementing authoritarian politics. Other features of the technology — reactor accidents and radioactive waste and others — were more important in triggering popular concern and opposition. The result was that a coalition of resistance could be built.

Another feature of nuclear power is that a standard plant is huge, both in power production and cost. This means that, once a plant is built, there were strong economic pressures to maintain the investment. When nuclear power is introduced, it is very hard to get rid of it. This provided an incentive for us to act before it was too late.

Plans for a nuclear future were expansive. As noted, proponents envisaged tens of thousands of nuclear power plants across the globe plus numerous reprocessing plants. Nuclear energy production would replace fossil fuels, providing a bridge to renewable sources, because uranium resources are finite, just like coal, oil and natural gas. Still, nuclear was the wave of the future, and nuclear scientists and engineers would lead the way.

Nuclear power programmes got started in the 1950s. There was a little criticism in the 1960s, and it was not until the 1970s that significant opposition developed, and by this time the nuclear enterprise had a big head start. Would it be possible to slow, halt and reverse this juggernaut, into which vast investments had been made?

Nuclear power has largely been promoted by governments, not by corporations, and in many cases commercial considerations have been secondary. Only in the US have corporations played a major role, but even there the government stepped in to protect the industry by exempting it from full liability for nuclear accidents. If the industry had had to purchase insurance on the open market, few companies would have taken the risk, because the consequence of a major reactor accident would be bankruptcy.

There was opposition. A few scientists were critical, which was crucial for puncturing the otherwise unanimous support of nuclear experts. Most of the opposition came from citizen campaigners, people who cared about the environment and health and had nothing personal to gain from taking action, except the satisfaction of working together for what they believed would be a better world. Well, of course nuclear proponents also thought they were trying to make the world a better place. It was just that they also stood to benefit personally or organisationally from the nuclear enterprise.

My friend and colleague Jim Falk was a leading campaigner against nuclear power. Our backgrounds were similar, with PhDs in theoretical physics, involvement in the Australian anti-uranium movement, and moving into the social studies of science and technology. Jim wrote a book titled *Global Fission* in which he described opposition to nuclear power worldwide.[2] One of his insights was that the opposition in a particular country reflected its social and

2 Jim Falk, *Global fission: the battle over nuclear power* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1982).

political structures. For example, in the US, with its decentralised politics and legal system, opponents targeted individual nuclear plants and made legal challenges. In France, where the political system is highly centralised, opposition to nuclear power was linked with regional challenges to the state.

Jim's book was published in 1982. Since then, the anti-nuclear movement has continued to play an important role in preventing a resurgence of nuclear power. The most comprehensive treatment I've found is a 1990 book by Wolfgang Rüdig, which covers social movement theory, preconditions for campaigns, local grassroots mobilising, siting of nuclear facilities, patterns of struggle and an insightful analysis of pro- and anti-nuclear strategies.[3]

Surely, I thought, there must be a more recent analysis of the movement, ideally a sweeping examination of global efforts, like an updated version of the books by Jim and Wolfgang. However, when I started searching, I couldn't find anything.

There are books and articles for and against nuclear power, tackling claims about it being a solution to the challenge of climate change. Nuclear power plants, in operation, have low greenhouse gas emissions, but they take a long time to build and are expensive. Wind and solar power can be brought online far more quickly and are much cheaper. Energy efficiency measures are even faster and cheaper. Nuclear power is a lumbering giant in a futile search for a role.

---

3 Wolfgang Rüdig, *Anti-nuclear movements: a world survey of opposition to nuclear energy* (Harlow: Longman, 1990).

Since the nuclear industry stalled, the anti-nuclear movement has shrunk in size and visibility, but there are many dedicated campaigners around the world ready to spring into action when new developments are proposed. They are effective because, in countries where citizen activism is not suppressed, the movement can grow rapidly if needed.

Meanwhile, the movement has had a huge indirect effect. It sensitised people and policy-makers to nuclear risks, especially to reactor accidents. That occurred in the 1970s. Prior to this, accidents and near misses received little publicity, but because the movement raised concerns, the partial reactor meltdown accident at Three Mile Island in Pennsylvania in 1979 was major story around the world, undermining the nuclear industry's credibility. The anti-nuclear movement was a prime reason why the media were so interested and why policy-makers became more reluctant to promote nuclear power. The same thing happened after the disasters at Chernobyl in 1986 and Fukushima in 2011. These accidents, and citizen objections, led to more stringent safety requirements, causing the cost of nuclear power to skyrocket.

This was Jim Falk's argument back in 1982. He wrote that "the accident at Three Mile Island provides a graphic illustration of the extraordinary sensitivity of the nuclear industry's economic fortunes to growth of community concern over nuclear hazards."[4] Subsequent events have shown the value of this analysis, which continues to apply. Referring especially to the US nuclear industry, Jim wrote:

4 Falk, *Global fission,* p. 62.

> Each of the interlocked strategies available to the industry — lobbying for favourable legislation, pressure for energy growth, the search for subsidies, and manoeuvring for "licensing stability" — are confronted by campaigns for further regulation of hazard, for energy conservation and alternative energy systems, for reduced subsidies, and for greater public participation in the licensing process.[5]

The struggle over nuclear power was never just about market forces. Whether or not nuclear power has ever been competitive in a market without the huge subsidies it has received, citizen opposition and related political action were and are crucial.

In contrast to Jim's book, much writing about nuclear matters completely ignores citizen activism. For example, I found a large book on nuclear economics with valuable material about costs and risks, including the contribution of the nuclear fuel cycle to proliferation of nuclear weapons.[6] Yet most of the contributors make no mention of citizen opposition, just an occasional note that finding sites for new plants can be difficult due to local resistance. This neglect of activism is common in scholarly treatments, which focus on the role of political systems, economics, policy-making and law.

The hopes of nuclear proponents have not been realised. Nuclear power has not become the dominant form

5 Ibid., p. 88.

6 Henry Sokolski (ed.), *Nuclear power's global expansion: weighing its costs and risks* (US: Strategic Studies Institute, 2010).

of electricity production, much less energy more generally. It has remained a relatively small component in most national energy supply systems. Overall, the anti-nuclear-power movement has been successful, a case of activists, without much money or backing from powerful sponsors, holding at bay a looming energy behemoth. Let's look at a few criteria.

• Changes in laws and rules. A few governments have passed laws to withdraw from nuclear power, but this has not been common.

• Changes in practices. In most countries, nuclear power has not become a major part of the electrical power system. Only a few countries have significant numbers of power plants, and there are few enrichment and reprocessing plants anywhere. Essentially, the nuclear power project, the plan for a massive industry, has stalled at best, and gone backwards in many places.

• Changes in attitudes. Most governments are sceptical about nuclear power, which is a big change since the 1970s. Similarly, popular opinion is fairly sceptical, especially after the accidents at Chernobyl and Fukushima. With the rise of climate change as the foremost environmental issue, there has been a resurgence of advocacy for nuclear power given its low carbon emissions in the operating phase, but this has not led to a burst of investment.

• Changes in movement strength, coherence, scale, diversity, commitment. Since the 1980s, the movement against nuclear power has been less prominent, mainly because nuclear power has stalled. Also, the movement is a minority interest because climate activism has taken over. It is plausible that, in many countries, any major push for

nuclear power would quickly reinvigorate the movement. It might be said that anti-nuclear sentiment has been mainstreamed, so movement agitation is less needed.

• Changes in obstacles. It is now easier to argue against nuclear power because solar and wind power are so much cheaper and quicker to bring to market.

• Embedding of change. When an energy option is institutionalised by extensive investments and infrastructure, it is more difficult to dislodge. The transition to renewable energy is well underway, and nuclear power is a tiny contribution to most energy systems. Today it provides about ten percent of global electricity generation, a significant decline from its peak in the 1990s. Without new investments, the nuclear contribution will continue to dwindle, barring some sudden change.

In summary, the hopes of nuclear proponents have not been realised — and neither have the worst fears of opponents. In a sense, nuclear power hasn't gotten much better, or much worse.

11
Science

In the early 1970s, while doing my PhD in theoretical physics, I became disillusioned with science. If I were starting a career in science today, I might be even more disillusioned.

The research process can be very satisfying. It is challenging and stimulating to try to solve puzzles, and rewarding to do this in collaboration with others. I wasn't disillusioned with scientific work, but with the influence of governments and corporations over research agendas.

The standard story in most textbooks, and the one scientists tell about themselves, is that science is the search for the truth about nature. It is a noble quest for discovery and scientists are the torchbearers, pushing back against dogma and ignorance. In this quest, the scientist is objective rather than biased. The ideal of the scientific method is that when researchers encounter information that clashes with their theories and hypotheses, they keep investigating until they figure out what's going on.

The philosopher Karl Popper came up with the idea of falsificationism. Instead of scientists looking for ways to confirm their theories and hypotheses, Popper said scientists should try to disprove, in other words falsify, them. Many scientists took this on board and claimed this is what they do, and felt superior to other fields, like psychoanalysis, whose claims supposedly couldn't be falsified.

Then along came historian-of-science Thomas Kuhn with his idea of paradigms.[1] Kuhn said that scientists, most of the time, solve puzzles within a dominant framework of assumptions and methods. Kuhn looked mainly at physics. In the earlier Ptolemaic paradigm, in which the sun and stars circle the earth, more and more epicycles were added to models of the heavens to explain the trajectories of the planets. Then there was what Kuhn called a scientific revolution, in this case the Copernican revolution. The Copernican model, in which the earth revolves around the sun, simplified the model of the heavens, and henceforth scientists operated under a different set of assumptions. The same scenario played out with the theories of relativity and quantum mechanics, which changed the operating assumptions for physicists, though Newtonian physics works well for many purposes.

The history of physics is one thing. More important are changes in the way science is done, who funds it and who benefits.

In the popular mind, scientific advances are made by geniuses working alone. Think of Charles Darwin travelling around the world on "The Beagle" making observations that led to the theory of evolution, or Albert Einstein working in the Swiss patent office and using thought experiments to develop the theory of special relativity. Or maybe small teams, like Marie and Pierre Curie, investigating radioactivity. There are still a few scientists who make

1 Thomas S. Kuhn, *The structure of scientific revolutions,* 2nd edition (University of Chicago Press, 1970).

advances working alone, building on the ideas of their forebears. But, for the most part, science has changed.

It happened, most obviously, during and after World War II, when governments began pouring massive amounts of money into research for war, most famously in the US Manhattan Project to build the atomic bomb. Science was bureaucratised, militarised and commercialised.

In 1976, two books edited by Hilary and Steven Rose were published: *The Political Economy of Science* and *The Radicalisation of Science.*[2] The idea behind the editors' analysis was that science had been "incorporated." It was no longer independent, pursued by scientists looking for the secrets of the universe, but was driven by government and corporate imperatives, mostly in teams of researchers, often with highly expensive equipment. These funders expected a return from their investment: scientific findings that would serve political and commercial goals.

The shift was called, by social researcher Derek de Solla Price, a transition from "little science" to "big science."[3] Big science costs more, requires teams of researchers and is sponsored by groups with power and wealth.

The books edited by the Roses were subtitled *Ideology in/of the Natural Sciences.* The word ideology refers to a set of ideas that, in this case, helped to justify a particular way of understanding the world. The Roses argued that the

2 Hilary Rose and Steven Rose, eds., *The political economy of science* and *The radicalisation of science* (London: Macmillan, 1976).

3 Derek J. de Solla Price, *Little science, big science* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963).

natural sciences — referring to physics, chemistry, biology and other sciences about nature, as opposed to social sciences about humans — were not pure, namely not just what was discovered by scientists searching for the truth. Instead, science as actually practised was guided by and served groups with vested interests. The idea that science is pure is a perfect smokescreen for science that is "incorporated."

When research is carried out in government or corporate labs, there are obvious influences on agendas. In nuclear weapons labs, there is a priority on researching, developing, testing and refining weapons capabilities, and little attention to alternatives to war. In chemical companies, there is a priority on researching and developing new chemicals and not much on the hazards of chemicals that the companies are already manufacturing and selling.

But what about universities? They are sometimes called ivory towers, interested in knowledge for its own sake and not much else. This might have been true, to some extent, long ago, but with the rise of big science, universities are driven by government and corporate research agendas. In part, this is by external funding of specific university research projects. Notoriously, tobacco companies tried to find university researchers willing to pursue lines of investigation that could be used to counter controls on smoking. As the tide turned against big tobacco, universities began refusing tobacco-company sponsorship. But refusing sponsorship is the exception. In many other areas, external funding is the name of the game.

Why do governments and corporations bother to fund university scientists? After all, they could just hire their

own scientists. A key reason is credibility. Many people are suspicious of findings from company research because there's an obvious conflict of interest. When a soap manufacturer says, "Our in-house research shows our soap is superior to all other brands," it's easy to dismiss the claim as self-serving. Universities, in contrast, maintain some appearance of independence, so if an academic says the company's soap is superior, this claim has more credibility. The company doesn't advertise that it sponsored the university research.

If scientists are objective in their investigations, should it make any difference who funds their research? There's something called the "funding effect." In practice, when scientists' research is paid for by a group with a vested interest, their results are much more likely to serve that group.[4]

This is most obvious in research by pharmaceutical companies. Their in-house researchers can use all sorts of tricks to come up with findings that support their company's drugs, for example running tests against non-inert placebos, not looking for longer-term side effects, and dismissing some of the ones that do show up.[5] This sort of research ends up being published in top medical journals. Furthermore, the company finds some academics who had no direct role in doing the research who agree to be listed

4 Sheldon Krimsky, *Conflicts of interest in science: how corporate-funded academic research can threaten public health* (New York: Hot Books, 2019).

5 Ben Goldacre, *Bad pharma: how drug companies mislead doctors and harm patients* (London: Fourth Estate, 2012).

as authors. By analogy with money-laundering, this might be called author-laundering: biased research is given a clean appearance by being ostensibly authored by independent university scientists. If an undergraduate student did something like this, it would be called cheating.

Pharmaceutical companies don't let research happen by chance. They plan the entire operation, including in-house research, authorship, publication and promotion. The promotion can include reprinting hundreds of thousands of copies of an article touting their drug and distributing them to doctors, especially those deemed to be opinion leaders, whose talks are scripted by companies.[6]

A paper published in 2018 begins this way:

> Corporate misrepresentation of scientific testing facilitated by third-party academic consultants is now well documented in medicine. The crucial components of the third-party strategy include ghostwriting, the creation of decoy research, marketing spin and public relations campaigns designed to discredit and intimidate critics.[7]

The author examined Monsanto documents, revealed during a legal process, to show that industry manipulation of science extends beyond medical research.

---

6 Sergio Sismondo, *Ghost-managed medicine: big pharma's invisible hands* (Manchester: Mattering Press, 2018).

7 Leemon B. McHenry, "The Monsanto papers: poisoning the scientific well," *International Journal of Risk & Safety in Medicine,* vol. 29, 2018, pp. 193–205.

Before getting carried away by contemporary corruptions of science, it's worth noting that there have always been suspect activities. Isaac Newton, one of the all-time greats of physics, was exposed centuries later by historian-of-science Richard Westfall for having altered data so his theories would look better.[8] Setting aside this sort of fiddling, done to gain priority in discovery from his rival Liebnitz, there is a bigger picture. In 1931, a group of Soviet scientists attended a conference in London where they presented a socialist analysis of science. Boris Hessen stunned the delegates with a paper arguing that the physical content of Newton's greatest work arose out of the tasks of the epoch in which he lived, in particular by the practical problems raised by the commercial class then gaining power.[9] Imagine, the theory of gravity could be thought of as a product of the emerging commercial culture. It wasn't "pure," deriving solely from nature. Hessen's analysis can be questioned,[10] but it was a sign of an alternative way of

8 Richard S. Westfall, "Newton and the fudge factor," *Science,* vol. 179, 23 February 1973, pp. 751–759.

9 B. Hessen, "The social and economic roots of Newton's 'Principia'," in N. I. Bukharin and others, *Science at the cross roads* (London: Kniga, 1931).

10 According to Loren R. Graham, "The socio-political roots of Boris Hessen: Marxism and the history of science," *Social Studies of Science,* vol. 15, no. 4, November 1985, pp. 705–722, Hessen at the time was arguing within the Soviet Union in favour of relativity and quantum theory against vulgar Marxist ideologists, arguing that the content of these theories could be separated from their bourgeois, idealist origins. By interpreting Newton in elementary

thinking, of seeing scientific knowledge not as solely reflecting the nature of the universe but as — also — a product of humans and hence reflecting human purposes, assumptions and biases. Another way to think of this is that scientific knowledge is created by humans for human purposes, rather than being "discovered" as something out there independent of humans.

Studying social influences on scientific knowledge can be fascinating intellectually, but there's an easier way to appreciate corporate influences. My friend and collaborator David Hess came up with the concept of "undone science."[11] It's straightforward to observe that some topics are researched while others are not. Sometimes, though, citizen groups call for research to be done, for example on the health effects of specific industrial chemicals. Companies could undertake this research but either they don't or they never publish the results. The reason: they suspect the results wouldn't serve their interests. Such research is "undone."

Marxist economic terms, Hessen demonstrated his Marxist orthodoxy.

11 David J. Hess, *Undone science: social movements, mobilized publics, and industrial transitions* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016). See also Scott Frickel, Sahra Gibbon, Jeff Howard, Joanna Kempner, Gwen Ottinger, and David J. Hess. "Undone science: charting social movement and civil society challenges to research agenda setting," *Science, Technology, & Human Values,* vol. 35, 2010, pp. 444–473.

Undone science is most easily observed in environmental and health areas. For example, there are few studies on the long-term health effects of chlorine chemicals, and relatively little research into nutritional and herbal therapies for cancer and other diseases. Undone science might be thought of as a result of what the Roses called the incorporation of science: agendas are set by governments and corporations, not by human needs.

Assessment

A key problem with science is the existence of conflicts of interest, most obviously when researchers have a stake in what research to undertake and what results to obtain. Is there a movement pushing for independent science, for the removal of conflicts of interest (COIs), for putting science at the service of the public rather than special interests?

First, it should be noted that there are many dedicated scientists who seek the truth and abjure any link to groups with interests in the outcome. They refuse tied funding and they publish their findings even at the risk of their reputations and careers. These sorts of scientists are the foundation for an independent science, but just on their own they are not a movement towards this sort of science. As noted, the frameworks that guide research, that prioritise puzzles to be solved, are themselves influenced by funding in a great number of fields. As well, scientists have a stake in their own careers, in impressing peers with their achievements, in getting published in the top journals, and this self-interest often takes research in directions that do not serve the public interest.

Second, there are numerous campaigners who expose the corruption of science by vested interests. Some campaigners are journalists, some are involved in activist groups and some are scientists themselves. Their efforts are crucial.

Because conflicts of interest in science have received so much attention, there has been a sustained response: COIs should be declared. Authors of papers in health-related and other fields are expected to declare whether they have received any funding from groups with a stake in the findings, or any other possible source of bias. This sounds good, but it's completely inadequate. Declaring a COI does not get rid of it, and in some circumstances may make bias easier.

What is almost absent is a movement to get rid of COIs altogether. Imagine that companies could not undertake their own research for publication. For example, pharmaceutical companies could develop drugs but all testing would be done by independent organisations. This would limit the influence of COIs but there would still be the problem of undone science. An even more radical alternative is that all development of drugs would be done by independent organisations, with no stake in the outcome. And the production and sales of drugs would not be for profit. The reputation of drug-developers and drug-testers would rest on safety, efficacy and accessibility, on serving the public interest, so much so that often a common substance, a nutrient or herb, would be recommended over a drug costing millions of dollars to develop.

You can see that getting rid of COIs can lead to far-reaching conclusions, and these ideas are getting so far from

today's research system — at least so far as biomedicine is concerned — as to seem fanciful. I mention these ideas to indicate that today's science has become so dependent on governments and corporations that "independent science" is almost utopian by comparison. Science was already compromised half a century ago, and things are far worse today. In this light, it is amazing that science retains some of its aura as a search for truth, unsullied by money, politics and ambition.

Nicholas Maxwell, a philosopher of science, published a book in which he referred to science, as practised, as being a "philosophy of knowledge."[12] By this he meant that scientists pursued knowledge without thinking of its purpose, and in practice this means that scientists become tools of whoever sets the agenda for research. Maxwell argued instead for a "philosophy of wisdom" in which scientists would tackle the most pressing problems facing humanity, for example war, poverty and environmental degradation.

Maxwell's first major articulation of this perspective was published in 1984. Are we any closer now to his vision of a philosophy of wisdom? I think not.

Challengers

The 1960s are known for the emergence or resurgence of citizen activism in Western countries, including the peace, environmental and feminist movements. One of these movements is little known: groups of scientists and citizens

12 Nicholas Maxwell, *From knowledge to wisdom: a revolution in the aims and methods of science* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984).

criticising the corporate influence over science and seeking an alternative. This alternative was indicated, in broad terms, by the titles of two magazines, *Science for People* published in Britain and *Science for the People* in the US. They represented a movement for a differently-directed science, but it was never strong, indeed hardly visible to the public — and these groups fizzled out.[13]

Still, there are a few signs of opposition to the incorporation of science. To confront corruption in biomedicine, campaigners have pushed for registration of drug trials so it is harder to distort results by publishing only those favourable to a company's drugs. Separately there is the open-access movement, pushing to make all scientific publications free online. These and other such efforts are important, but do not get to the roots of the problem.

Another challenge comes from what can be called citizen science or grassroots science: research undertaken by citizen groups on issues of importance to their communities, for example tests of local shrubs for levels of pollutants. Closely related are networks of people concerned about diseases, sharing information about symptoms and treatments. There are even some underground networks for gaining access to treatments.

Individuals involved in grassroots science have their own agendas, to be sure. The difference is that they are

13 Rita Arditti, Pat Brennan and Steve Cavrak (eds.), *Science and liberation* (Boston: South End Press, 1980) is a representative collection of articles, mostly from *Science for the People.* For more recent activity, and archives, see https://scienceforthepeople.org

openly sharing what they learn and do not stand to gain great wealth and power from their efforts.

The overall prognosis: the movement against incorporated science is weak and scattered, and currently is only making limited progress against the powerful groups that shape scientific research to their own ends. In a sense, much of science is going down the drain, yet many committed campaigners are doing their best to move in a different direction.

12
Smoking

I can remember when smoking was allowed just about everywhere in Australia. People smoked in trains, buses, aeroplanes and offices. It seemed like non-smoking areas were the exception. People could smoke in theatre lobbies but not in theatres. In aeroplanes, there were rows of seats designated as non-smoking, but when I was unlucky I'd be sitting just behind smokers. Passengers weren't supposed to smoke when not in their seats, but some did anyway.

I've always hated cigarette smoke. It stinks. I avoided bars, parties and other occasions where lots of people smoke, and most of my friends have been non-smokers.

But things were already changing. Arriving in Sydney in 1969, the railways had just introduced non-smoking carriages. This allowed some relief from smoking on the platforms, though some passengers still smoked in the non-smoking carriages. I used to approach them and ask them politely not to smoke or to move to a smoking carriage. Some were apologetic and obliged but others were defiant and hostile. Only peer pressure could stop this sort of behaviour because the railway staff did not enforce the non-smoking rules.

Not long after, all railway carriages became non-smoking. Later, smoking was banned on buses and aeroplanes. It was wonderful.

At the university, smoking was not allowed in class-rooms, but staff could smoke in their offices. I remember

visiting a senior colleague who went through the ritual of smoking a pipe. Then smoking was banned inside and near buildings, with the exception of the bar. When smoking was banned in the bar, smoking was still allowed in the outdoor area. The prohibitions were gradually extended, and in 2016 smoking was banned across campus.

These changes didn't happen on their own. There was pressure from many quarters to control and restrict smoking. Most dramatic was an Australian campaign called BUGA-UP, which stood for Billboard Utilising Graffitists Against Unhealthy Promotions and was pronounced like "bugger up," meaning to mess up. BUGA-UP activists covertly defaced billboards, often creatively rewording the text to make striking commentary, for example changing "Anyhow have a Winfield" — Winfield was a prominent cigarette brand in Australia — to "man how I hate a Winfield."

Today there are plenty of billboards and other public advertisements but none promoting cigarettes, so it is hard to remember what it was like when cigarette ads were all around, as was smoking. BUGA-UP was just one element of the efforts against smoking carried out by campaigners in the medical profession, companies, governments and the general public. Eventually, anti-smoking became a dominant movement, so much so that the Australian government pioneered plain-packaging laws so cigarette packs could not be sold with brand logos.

These changes were fiercely resisted by the tobacco industry, which used its vast financial resources not just for billboard ads but for other modes of influence, among them sponsorship of artistic and sporting activities. For many years, a leading sporting competition was called the Winfield Cup. Anti-smoking campaigners had to counter this sort of implicit endorsement entrenched by dependence on tobacco-industry sponsorship.

Smoking had been normalised in many sectors of the population and was especially prevalent in some venues, such as bars and parties, and among certain sectors of the population, such as artists and trade union officials. Gradually there was a shift so non-smoking became the norm in many circles, with smoking increasingly stigmatised. How did this cultural shift occur?

Let's set that question aside for a moment and look at things in a different way. Putting restrictions on smoking in Australia took a very long time — decades. The tobacco industry fought against its opponents with clever tactics, blocking or delaying controls and seeking to entice a new generation of smokers. The question perhaps should be,

why did it take so long to control the industry, indeed why is it allowed to continue at all? After evidence became public about how deadly and addictive smoking is, and how the industry covered up its own evidence of the massive harm it was causing, why didn't governments put tobacco company executives in prison, nationalise the industry, and bring in medical experts to design a humane programme to help smokers end their habits? After all, tobacco was responsible for more disease, death and suffering than all illegal drugs combined.

The successes of Australian anti-smoking campaigners were unusual on the world scene. While the industry faced controls in some countries and unprecedented fines in the US, it was expanding to other markets, recruiting new customers and suborning governments that might want to restrain it. Strangely, governments around the world were willing to sign up for the "war on drugs," demonising heroin, cocaine and even marijuana, while allowing the deadliest drug of all to become a national habit.

Then there is the question of how company insiders justified their actions to themselves. Even if they weren't publicly denounced as criminals, surely they must have known about the harm being caused by the products they promoted. Is this a mystery or just par for the course, like any other socially damaging enterprise?

There are many questions, but now it's time to look at analyses based on in-depth studies of the tobacco issue.

Golden Holocaust

The most comprehensive and authoritative treatment of the tobacco story is *Golden Holocaust,* by Robert Proctor, an

historian of science at Stanford University.[1] He is also noted for his books on racial hygiene, in other words, the Nazis and personal health. Proctor does not pretend to offer a neutral assessment of tobacco, as indicated by the subtitle of his book: *Origins of the Cigarette Catastrophe and the Case for Abolition.*

His book is massive in scope, size and scholarship. It covers, in-depth, the origins of the tobacco industry and cigarette smoking, the emergence of understanding about cancer hazards, and the industry's conspiracy to promote smoking internationally. "Conspiracy" is a strong word. Proctor tells how the industry nurtured tame experts to back its position, promoted ignorance, and marketed filters and light cigarettes knowing they didn't make smoking any safer. Proctor is an authority on manufactured ignorance and co-edited the book *Agnotology* on this topic, and he uses his expertise to the full in *Golden Holocaust.* He recounts how the industry, when confronted with evidence about hazards, publicly dismissed them while privately studying and preparing to counter them. Proctor also delves into several issues neglected in the public debate over smoking, for example the presence of radioactive elements in tobacco and the evidence they may be responsible for some of the damage caused by smoking.

People have been smoking for centuries, so what's new? Proctor highlights the way manufacturing and marketing transformed a fashionable pastime of the rich

1 Robert N. Proctor, *Golden holocaust: origins of the cigarette catastrophe and the case for abolition* (University of California Press, 2011).

into a mass addiction mainly of the poor. He notes that since 1900, the number of cigarettes smoked worldwide has increased by a factor of one thousand. The human cost is immense: six million deaths per year. In the 1900s, 100 million people died as a result of smoking. In the 2000s, unless patterns change, the figure could be one billion, over one out of ten people alive. Half of lifetime smokers will die from their habit.

How could this be, given the increasingly strict measures taken against smoking in Australia and other countries? Proctor notes that smoking rates are declining in richer countries while continuing in most poorer ones, as the industry seeks to maintain sales. And the industry is incredibly sophisticated in how it markets a deadly drug, using sales messages that tap into people's desires, for example making young people feel it's forbidden fruit and paying to get film stars to smoke in movies.

Given that cigarettes are the single greatest cause of preventable death, why haven't governments done more about it, and right away? A key factor is taxes. Yes, cigarette taxes reduce consumption, but they also bring revenue to the government — lots of it. Another factor is that the industry is fabulously wealthy, easily able to outspend tobacco-control advocates.

Proctor thinks cigarettes ought to be banned, and calls this abolition, not prohibition. Prohibition didn't work for alcohol, but cigarettes are different. Most smokers would prefer to quit, but they're addicted and can't easily do it. They don't enjoy smoking and only do it to allay their craving. In contrast, most drinkers are not addicted and they enjoy drinking. This at least is Proctor's argument. Short of

abolition, he offers a long list of ways to reduce smoking, ranging from taxes to giving films with smoking a highly restrictive rating.

If you oppose smoking, *Golden Holocaust* provides information to counter just about every myth and argument you might encounter.

Making Smoking History

For insights from the front lines of anti-smoking activism, the most valuable source I know is Simon Chapman's book *Public Health Advocacy and Tobacco Control.* The subtitle succinctly states the goal: *Making Smoking History.* Chapman, after completing his PhD in preventive and social medicine at the University of Sydney, soon had a job advising the minister of health in the state of South Australia on some of the most advanced tobacco control measures in the world. He acquired immense experience in all facets of the struggle against smoking interests.

Chapman's book begins with a discussion of ethical issues associated with tobacco control and then engages with the field of public health. He gives the example of public grieving over the murder of a prominent heart-transplant surgeon, Victor Chang, noting that numerous individuals working in preventive health save far more lives than any surgeon, but they are unknown and unsung. Furthermore, even within the public health field — Chapman's own — there is one aspect that is neglected: advocacy. Yet advocacy is what is needed most of all on many issues. Chapman by that time had written twelve books and hundreds of scholarly articles, but he believed that his newspaper articles and interviews on radio and

television had been more influential. As he put it, "scholarship, for all its importance, exists in political backwaters and seldom influences practice, public or political opinion."[2]

His book deals with every aspect of anti-smoking campaigning, with an emphasis on strategy. Chapman provides careful assessments of news coverage. He examines community-level initiatives including smoking bans in restaurants, airports, homes, workplaces and outdoors. He examines reducing the displays of tobacco products in shops and replacing branding on cigarette packs with photos of diseases caused by smoking. He examines the tobacco industry's strategy in the face of the anti-smoking movement. These are nuanced discussions. Chapman does not automatically endorse every measure to control smoking, because some measures can be counter-productive or open the door to clever counter-measures by the industry — or they are unfair or disproportional.

Since the 1980s, second-hand smoke has been the key to tobacco control. If smoking affected only the smoker, it would be hard to justify controls such as bans in restaurants.

Ultimately, smoking needs to be "denormalised." Decades ago, smoking was just part of what many people did, in homes, offices, shops and cars. Tobacco control efforts, when they are most successful, change smoking from being a normal activity to being deviant.

Chapman has been a fierce advocate in Australia but, through personal experience and research, he is also quite

2 Simon Chapman, *Public health advocacy and tobacco control: making smoking history* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), p. xi.

aware of efforts in countries around the world. He is attuned to how Australian campaigners have been among those leading the way towards smoking cessation. He gives plenty of figures, for example the proportion of doctors who smoke, 2% in Australia compared with 30% in France.

One of the most complex areas in tobacco control is harm reduction. Should support be given to nicotine patches? What about outdoor dining? If smoking is banned only indoors and al fresco dining is more desirable in some places, does the ban need to be extended? What about special rooms for smokers in airports? A wily anti-smoking campaigner needs to be informed about what to push for and how to do it. The final section in Chapman's book is a lengthy A to Z of topics on "tobacco control advocacy strategy," for example analogies, editorials, media etiquette, petitions and whistleblowers. Is it worth writing letters to politicians? Chapman offers sage advice. This is valuable for anyone with an interest in advocacy on any issue, not just anti-smoking. *Public Health Advocacy and Tobacco Control* deserves to be read for its insights, and then for campaigners to apply the ideas to new challenges such as vaping.[3]

An unusual controversy

The struggle over smoking includes a struggle over claims about the health effects of smoking. This is what is known to social researchers as a "scientific controversy." It is a

3 Chapman continues to provide incisive assessments. His latest book is *Quit smoking weapons of mass distraction* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2022).

dispute between experts, but in the case of smoking it is also a struggle between promoters and opponents of smoking, so it's more accurate to call it a public scientific controversy. There are lots of these, for example disputes over nuclear power, pesticides, microwaves and genetically modified organisms. In most such disputes, experts line up in support of the most powerful groups involved. For example, most experts support pesticides, the side backed by the pesticide industry. Smoking, as a controversy, is different, or rather became different. Beginning in the 1950s, expert opinion on health effects shifted from defending to opposing smoking. The result: most experts and authority figures — researchers, doctors and health officials — line up on the side opposed to the powerful tobacco industry. Imagine how difficult it would have been to oppose smoking if researchers had remained captives of the industry.

Assessment

What are the driving forces behind smoking as a widespread habit? First, humans are easily addicted. Second, mass manufacturing made it possible to produce vast numbers of cigarettes at low cost. Third, capitalist economies offered large profits to tobacco companies. Fourth, governments and their regulatory agencies offered little resistance.

Assessing the anti-smoking movement is complicated by varying conditions across the globe. In some places, such as California and Australia, strong control measures have been introduced, cutting consumption and stigmatising smoking. In many other places, smoking is largely

uncontrolled, and tobacco companies continue with various methods of increasing sales. Meanwhile, new techniques of promoting smoking are being developed, notably vaping, with the promise of hooking young people.

The movement against smoking has grown from strength to strength, but it has faced and continues to face formidable opposition: tobacco companies with their sophisticated strategies, large numbers of addicted smokers, and lacklustre government regulators.

If you're a nonsmoker and live somewhere where smoking has been restricted and stigmatised, things are a lot better than they used to be. If you're a public health advocate like Simon Chapman, you will know that a lot more needs to be done to minimise the massive harm still being caused by tobacco. Still, without anti-smoking campaigners who have worked incredibly hard, smoking would be a much worse problem than it is.

13
Social experimentation

> *... the great scientific revolution is still to come. It will ensue when men collectively and co-operatively organize their knowledge for application to achieve and make secure social values; when they systematically use scientific procedures for the control of human relationships and the direction of the social effects of our vast technological machinery. Great as have been the social changes of the last century, they are not to be compared with those which will emerge when our faith in scientific method is made manifest in social works.*[1]

So wrote John Dewey, an educationist, psychologist and philosopher, and one of the most prominent intellectual figures of his time. He wrote this in 1931 — and the great scientific revolution he spoke of is *still* to come.

Aristotle, the authoritative ancient Greek philosopher, said a large rock would fall faster than a small rock. This view was treated as the truth. It only makes sense. But then in 1589, Galileo went up to the top of the Leaning Tower of Pisa and dropped two spheres, a large one and a small one. Lo and behold, they landed at the same time.

---

1 John Dewey, *Philosophy and civilization* (New York: Minton, Balch & Company, 1931), pp. 329–330.

This probably never happened, at least not in this exact way, but the lesson is clear. Scientists test things to see what happens. They don't just rely on what they think will happen. They don't just rely on their beliefs.

Scientific research has had an enormous impact on the world, enabling new understandings and capacities. A crucial part of this research is experimentation: trying things out, under carefully controlled conditions, and observing and analysing what happens.

If experimentation is so important in figuring out what works in physics, chemistry, biology and other sciences, then why not other fields? There's a lot of experimentation in psychology but little in sociology and political science. Why not?

In 2020, governments around the world started reacting to a new pandemic disease called Covid-19. They imposed lockdowns, masks and distancing. In 2021, many began requiring vaccinations. In the beginning, little was known about the virus, its modes of spread and its lethality, so there was considerable uncertainty about how to respond. It seemed like a good idea, in some places at least, to take strong measures. But some of the measures had adverse effects.[2] Lockdowns affected people's finances and mental health, and the side effects of the experimental vaccines were not fully known.

---

2 For example, Coilín ÓhAiseadha et al., "Unintended consequences of COVID-19 non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) for population health and health inequalities," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health,* vol. 20, 2023, 5223.

This would have been an ideal time for social experiments. Different control measures could be tried on different groups of people to see what happened. A lockdown here, no lockdown there, with careful examination of impacts of all sorts. It might be complicated and the results might not be definitive, but surely some evidence would have been better than none. But no carefully designed experiments of this sort were carried out.

It might be argued that it would be unethical to do such research because it is obvious that wearing masks, or lockdowns, or vaccinations, save lives. The whole point of research is to discover what is not known, and this includes testing views assumed to be obvious. Vast amounts of research are carried out with implications for people's lives. Imagine that a social experiment on Covid-control measures, involving 10,000 people, with risks to lives. That is serious, but so are the potential benefits. The findings from the study could apply to the entire world's population, thus affecting a lot more lives.

These are all interesting and important issues. The point is that there was no push to initiate extensive research on Covid-control measures. In other areas, there is even less interest in social experimentation.

Imagine comparing two workplaces, one with the usual system of bosses and subordinates and the other with workers collectively deciding how to carry out their jobs.[3]

3 Seymour Melman, *Decision-making and productivity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), argued that large industrial plants can be operated without unilateral, managerial control. There is a long history of campaigning for workers' control as well as academic

Imagine comparing two neighbourhoods, one in which children go to school in the usual way, the other in which children learn through participation in activities in the neighbourhood that serve as a form of collective home-schooling.[4] Imagine comparing two small countries, one with a military and the other with a nonviolent defence system.

Depending on the topic, experiments along these lines are rare or non-existent. Essentially, social arrangements are treated as the way things are, not to be informed by research into significantly different alternatives.[5]

Actually, there is a lot of research relevant to topics including work, education and defence, but most of it is about how to do things better within current assumptions, for example militaries trying out new ways of training soldiers to kill or market researchers testing different pitches to consumers. Two things are lacking. One is large-scale experimentation with different social arrangements.[6] The other is the political will to act on relevant research.

---

studies of worker participation. Still, evidence for alternatives to managerial control is mostly ignored and there is little support for research into such alternatives. See the chapter on work.

4 See the chapter on deschooling.

5 An earlier comment of mine about this: "Social testing," *Social Alternatives,* vol. 25, no. 4, Fourth Quarter 2006, pp. 39–42.

6 Some large-scale changes can be called experiments, for example changes in education introduced in the Soviet Union, but these usually lack a systematic comparison with controls.

Researchers have argued that greater economic equality would improve overall human happiness.[7] That's because poor people gain a lot more happiness from each dollar of extra income than rich people do. Greater equality would make the world a happier place overall, but acting on this research finding is not a priority, at least not for those in power.

Assessing progress in social experimentation is straightforward. In most areas, there has been little improvement in the past half century, or whatever time period you might like to choose. There are few large-scale experiments, and little political will to act on social research that has been done when findings clash with powerful interests. It's acceptable to spend billions of dollars on accelerators and telescopes but not on social experimentation.

In 1960, the former vice-chancellor of the University of Adelaide wrote, "whilst universities consider research to be one of the most, if not the most, important of its functions, they show great reluctance to undertake any research into their own affairs or face changes in a spirit of experiment."[8]

---

7 See, among others, Robert H. Frank, *Falling behind: how rising inequality harms the middle class* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Bruno S. Frey and Alois Stutzer, *Happiness and economics: how the economy and institutions affect well-being* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002); Richard Layard, *Happiness: lessons from a new science* (London: Penguin, 2005). See also the chapter on happiness.

8 A. P. Rowe, *If the gown fits* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1960), p. 14.

If this reluctance ever changes, it might bring about massive changes in social practices and arrangements, akin to those engendered by the scientific revolution, just as John Dewey suggested. Don't hold your breath!

Is large-scale social experimentation getting better? In terms of research projects, a little bit. In terms of implementation, hardly at all.

14
Surveillance

In 1970, the war in Vietnam was raging. In the US, some individuals were so opposed to the war that they were willing to take antiwar actions that carried the risk of going to prison. One of them was William Davidon, a physics professor who had participated in raids on the offices of draft boards. The raids were intended to destroy records used by the boards for conscripting young men into the US Army.

Davidon suspected that he and other antiwar activists were being spied on by the FBI, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, but he had no proof. At the time, the FBI basked in its reputation as a fearless opponent of criminal activity. Davidon had the idea of breaking into an FBI office to steal files that might reveal the FBI's illegal surveillance and harassment of activists. He was able to convince seven others to join him in a burglary of an FBI office. They picked a smaller office, in the city of Media, Pennsylvania, because it was less protected than major offices. They spent months planning the operation.

Davidon was a calm, focused and inspiring leader who offered wise advice. Several in the group had been involved in antiwar activities, so the FBI might have been listening to their phone calls. Davidon said that when on the phone they should speak naturally and in a sort of coded language about their plans, so as not to arouse suspicion. One

member of the team, Bonnie Raines, pretended to be a student doing an assignment and, having disguised herself a bit, visited the Media FBI office to observe the layout of rooms and files. Others in the group spent long hours observing the area near the office to learn the routines of anyone who might see them. One member practised lock-picking skills, using tools he made himself, until he could pick a lock like the one on the office door within ten minutes.

On the night of 6 March 1971, the burglars executed their plan. They nearly came to grief when there was an extra lock on the door, so they switched to a backup plan to enter by a different door. This meant hours of delay, which turned out to be a stroke of luck. That night, a fight for the heavyweight boxing championship of the world was taking place between Joe Frazier and Muhammad Ali, and nearly everyone in the country was tuned in to the radio broadcast. The burglary coincided with the fight, which meant the attention of guards and other potential witnesses was on the fight. Davidon and his co-conspirators carried away all the files in the Media office and took them to a safe house where they spent the next week reading them, making copies and sending them, bit by bit, to journalists.

One of the recipients was Betty Medsger, who wrote for the *Washington Post,* one of the country's most prestigious and influential newspapers. Some editors didn't want to run the story, but the *Post*'s publisher, Katherine Graham, overruled them. The FBI's dirty tricks were exposed to the world.

Davidon was right about the FBI. It had been undertaking extensive political surveillance, especially of black

activists and antiwar activists, even though they were doing nothing illegal. But it went even further. The FBI had a programme called COINTELPRO for disrupting groups, for example by circulating fabricated documents to promote internal conflict.

J. Edgar Hoover, the director of the FBI since the 1920s, launched a massive hunt for the burglars. Everyone in the Pennsylvania peace movement was under suspicion. But the burglars were never caught.

On Davidon's advice, they agreed beforehand that after the burglary they would never make contact with each other for the rest of their lives, thereby reducing the risk that anyone's arrest would lead to the others. All eight of them kept this vow until, decades later, the *Washington Post* journalist Betty Medsger happened to be visiting Bonnie and John Raines for unrelated reasons, and John let slip that they were two of the burglars. The others then agreed to talk with Medsger, who wrote an epic book about the burglary and the FBI.[1]

The Media files opened the door to probes into the FBI's secret spying and disruption operations, and later more information became available through freedom-of-information requests. It turned out that Davidon had been right to be cautious when talking on the phone. The FBI was bugging all his calls and transcribing all his conversations, but never realised that he was leading an operation to steal FBI files. Medsger comments that the FBI's massive surveillance programme included using 100,000 members

1 Betty Medsger, *The burglary: the discovery of J. Edgar Hoover's secret FBI* (New York: Vintage, 2014).

of the American Legion, a veterans service organisation, to spy on alleged subversives. This was the closest thing to the spying operations by the Stasi, the secret police in former East Germany under communist rule.

Snowden

Forty years after the Media burglary, there was another burglary, except it was an inside job.[2] Edward Snowden was a young computer whiz who worked for a contractor to the US National Security Agency, the biggest spy organisation in the country. Times had changed. Most spying was now done electronically. The NSA intercepted nearly everything people communicated by phone, email or other electronic means. It did this secretly because it was illegal to spy on Americans without a court-approved warrant, and courts wouldn't give warrants to spy on citizens going about their normal, legal business.

The NSA was the linchpin in a global network involving the spy agencies in four other countries: Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. This "Five Eyes" network was unknown to the general public, even to legislators. For many years, the very existence of the NSA was a secret even though its budget was far larger than those of the well-known CIA and FBI. A few investigators exposed Five Eyes operations, but not much detail was known.[3]

---

2 In an unpublished text, Kelly Gates wrote about the Media burglary and Snowden. Maybe this gave me the idea to do the same. If so, thanks Kelly!

3 James Bamford's 1982 book *The puzzle palace* exposed the NSA. Nicky Hager, *Secret power: New Zealand's role in the*

Snowden changed all this. He learned about the scale of NSA spying and decided to expose it. Seeing what had happened to other intelligence-community whistleblowers who tried to raise concerns through proper channels, Snowden decided to leak a vast trove of NSA documents to the media. But it wasn't easy. He carefully selected journalists he thought he could trust, realising that most US media organisations, being too close to the government, might not run the story. He had to coach the journalists on how to communicate securely. He was successful, but at a cost. Unlike the Media burglars, it was impossible to remain anonymous. A few days after the first stories about the NSA files, Snowden revealed his identity and sought a safe haven, inadvertently ending up in Russia.[4]

The Snowden files showed that the NSA collected a vast range of electronic communications. It accessed emails and other data collected or transmitted by Google, Apple and other platforms, including supposedly secure messages. Though the mandate of the NSA was foreign threats, it

---

international spy network (Nelson, NZ: Craig Potton, 1996), exposed the Five-Eyes network, but his revelations received little attention.

4 There are quite a few good treatments of the Snowden story, including Glenn Greenwald, *No place to hide: Edward Snowden, the NSA and the surveillance state* (London: Hamish Hamilton 2014); Michael Gurnow, *The Edward Snowden affair: exposing the politics and media behind the NSA scandal* (Indianapolis, IN: Blue River Press, 2014); Luke Harding, *The Snowden files: the inside story of the world's most wanted man* (London: Guardian Books 2014); Edward Snowden, *Permanent record* (London: Macmillan, 2019).

collected information on all US citizens and intercepted phone calls by leaders of friendly governments such as Germany. Whatever the legalities — which were disputed — the NSA's activities were far more extensive and intrusive than outsiders knew. Like the Media burglars, Snowden revealed a side of an organisation that it had tried to hide for decades. The obvious question was, if what the NSA was doing was legitimate, why try to keep it secret? The outrage about the revelation of NSA spying provided the answer.

The uses of surveillance

Surveillance basically means watching someone or something. It's not inherently bad. When a parent watches to make sure a child doesn't run in front of a car, that might be called surveillance, and often it is warranted. When hospital staff monitor a patient's breathing and other vital signs, this is a benevolent form of surveillance.

When police monitor the movements of someone suspected of being a dangerous criminal, let's say a possible serial killer, this is a different sort of surveillance. It is not to protect the suspect but to gather evidence for arrest and prosecution, thereby protecting others, those who might be the next murder targets.

Protection from harm can be valuable, but it's also possible for there to be too much protection. The parents of some children with intellectual disabilities are so protective that the children are prevented from having experiences like riding a train or going to shops. This sort of overprotection is motivated by love but still can limit a person's potential.

Similarly, the rationale for police, armies and spy

agencies is to protect the citizenry from threats including crime, foreign enemies and insurgents. Problems arise when protection becomes excessive, limiting people's freedoms. Citizens may be treated as potential enemies.

The rationale for political spying is to stop the bad guys, the criminals, the subversives, the terrorists. In practice, political spying can easily overstep this sort of rationale. The FBI under J. Edgar Hoover — and directors after him — spent much of its efforts monitoring individuals and disrupting groups doing things that were legal. Hoover thought anyone with radical ideas was a threat. And indeed they were: a threat to change society, for example to end the war in Vietnam. Political spying in such cases serves one side in what otherwise might be the normal operation of politics.

The political role of surveillance is most clear-cut in dictatorial societies, in which opposition groups are banned or hindered. Surveillance is a tool for the ruling group to prevent challengers from gaining support. In some countries without dictators, surveillance is used to gain political advantage.[5]

Technology

As suggested by the contrast between the 1971 FBI-burglary disclosures and the Snowden disclosures, the biggest changes in surveillance over the past half century or

5 See, for example, the revealing account by Rob Evans and Paul Lewis, *Undercover: the true story of Britain's secret police* (London: Faber and Faber, 2013).

so relate to technology.[6] In the 1950s, in countries like the US, the main forms of telecommunication were radio, television and telephone — and the telephones all operated through telephone lines. Political spying relied heavily on people who infiltrated groups of interest. In the US, FBI agents joined the Communist Party to collect information on party members and plans. At some meetings, more agents attended than genuine members.

Another method was observation. Agents would sit in cars or rooms in buildings, watching who attended a meeting or who talked with whom. They could also take photos. If there was a peace rally, agents would take photographs and try to identify those attending, adding to dossiers about individuals of interest.

Then there was tapping of telephones. The FBI would listen in on conversations, record them and transcribe what was said. This was labour-intensive. There were not enough staff to listen in on everyone's phone calls, so surveillance was selective. Even so, there was an enormous amount of interception even in the pre-Internet days, with technology

---

6 There is much high-quality writing about surveillance, for example Danielle Keats Citron, *The fight for privacy: protecting dignity, identity, and love in the digital age* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2022); Susan Landau, *Listening in: cybersecurity in an insecure age* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017); David Lyon, *The electronic eye: the rise of surveillance society* (Polity, 1994); Gary T. Marx, *Windows into the soul: surveillance and society in an age of high technology* (University of Chicago Press, 2016); Bruce Schneier, *Data and Goliath: the hidden battles to collect your data and control your world* (New York: Norton, 2015); the journal *Surveillance and Society.*

to pick out voices and search for keywords.[7]

Compare that to the 2020s, when nearly everyone carries a phone. It allows your location to be tracked. Every time you go to a website, you create a data trail of your online activity. When you make a payment using a credit card, that information is electronically stored and used to create a profile of your consumer habits. Third parties can obtain that information, by agreement or purchase.

As you walk along a street in a downtown area or enter a shop, your movements can be recorded with security cameras. Maybe there is face recognition software so your identity can be found. When you're driving, your car's licence number can be scanned and your vehicle's location recorded.

Then there's what happens online. When you make a comment on Facebook or post an image on Instagram, you help companies build and refine your data profile. Programs can scour everything about you that's online. Imagine that artificial intelligence is used to examine your every online interaction: every site you visit, how long you pause to watch an advertisement, every purchase, every post, every like. You may have forgotten what you looked at a month ago, but the information is there to be processed. The result is that others — those with access to your data — draw conclusions about you different from how you view

7 On surveillance in Britain, see Patrick Fitzgerald and Mark Leopold, *Stranger on the line: the secret history of phone tapping* (London: Bodley Head, 1987). Their message is that dissidents should assume that nothing can be kept secret: "In the last analysis, there is no defence against bugging and tapping" (p. 204).

yourself or wish to be viewed by others. They, or rather their automated programs, make predictions about what videos you'd like to see, what products and services you'd like to purchase, where you plan to travel, what you like and don't like about your job, and maybe even what habits you'd like to break but can't. Note that surveillance is just one of the problems with using social media.[8]

For the most part, this information is used to sell you things by selecting sales pitches targeted to your interests. That's companies pursuing profits by gathering information about you. Political groups get into the act, trying to sell you candidates, policies and promises.

In years past, most people valued their privacy, not wanting to reveal personal information unless they were confident it would not be misused. Times have changed: these concerns seem to have gone out the window, along with piles of personal data. In essence, people sacrifice their privacy for online convenience.

Consider, for example, posting selfies online. Lots of people do it, despite the risks, which are increasing. With facial recognition software improvements, it's now possible to track individuals through daily lives, building up profiles of their activities and preferences. So what? If this information is used only for marketing, maybe it's a price worth paying.

One of the prices, or rather vulnerabilities, of information collection arises from the vast quantities of personal data stored by companies and government bodies. Mali-

8 Jaron Lanier, *Ten arguments for deleting your social media accounts right now* (London: Vintage, 2018).

cious hackers attempt to break in, collect data and demand ransoms. They can sell credit card data on the dark web, or use data about health or personal behaviours for blackmail.

If you ever look at pornographic websites, your browsing history is part of the personal data that could be stolen and used against you. The vulnerabilities come not just from outside hackers. Insiders such as police, who have access to such data, can use it for personal or political purposes.

The vast quantities of personal data now collected and stored can be likened to toxic waste. It's harmless if it never surfaces, but the greater the waste, the greater the risks. The entire information economy is built around accumulating ever more of such waste.[9]

These personal risks, arising from commercial uses of data, are one thing. Far more serious are the political uses of data. In many countries, government agencies spy on dissidents. For example, the Israeli company NSO produces software called Pegasus. It can be secretly installed on the phones of targets and makes available everything on the phone: calls, texts, files, browsing. Targets can then be tracked and, when desired, arrested.

For example, in Togo, where Pegasus was used,

> … the regime could read activists' private WhatsApp messages. Arrests and torture were based on details contained in these conversations. How that had occurred was revealed in a 2018 report by Citizen Lab,

9 Carissa Véliz, *Privacy Is power: why and how you should take back control of your data* (London: Bantam Press, 2020).

> a Canadian cybersecurity research group, after they uncovered the presence of Israeli company NSO Group Pegasus spyware on activists' smartphones, a tool that allows the complete capture of all data on the device. It was bought from NSO by the regime in 2016.[10]

Have things gotten better or worse in relation to surveillance? It is safe to say that today there is vastly more commercial surveillance than decades ago. So far as political surveillance is concerned, it depends on where you live. In authoritarian regimes, political surveillance is probably greater today because digital monitoring is so much easier than before. Similarly in countries where civil liberties are ostensibly protected: most likely political surveillance is more pervasive than before because it's become digital and few people can avoid leaving data trails. On the other hand, if you live somewhere that used to have a massive spying operation and now doesn't (like the former East Germany), you might be under less onerous scrutiny.

Resistance?

What about an anti-surveillance movement? When we think of a social problem like exploitation of workers, there is resistance, embodied by what is called the labour movement. Then there are the peace movement, the feminist movement, the environmental movement and many others.

---

10 Antony Loewenstein, *The Palestine laboratory: how Israel exports the technology of occupation around the world* (Melbourne: Scribe, 2023), p. 163.

These social movements typically are composed of individuals and groups taking actions towards a common cause.

Surveillance has been an issue for a long time. The Media burglars thought it was such an important issue that they were willing to risk going to prison to expose it. Edward Snowden, in a very different context, thought the same thing. But they are unusual — very unusual. There are peace rallies, rallies against racism, even rallies against a new McDonald's outlet, but rallies against surveillance are rare.

Instead, most people seem unaware or complacent about the monitoring of their lives. They carry around phones that record their location. They use the Google search engine, which keeps a record of every site they visit. They use credit cards, allowing banks to record every transaction. The technologies enabling pervasive surveillance have become so much a part of everyday life that it can be hard to imagine life without continual monitoring.

Nevertheless, there is some resistance. For decades, privacy groups have been trying to limit intrusive monitoring.[11] Their main approach has been regulatory, but unfortunately most privacy laws have not kept up with

11 Duncan Campbell and Steve Connor, *On the record: surveillance, computers and privacy — the inside story* (London: Michael Joseph, 1986); David H. Flaherty, *Protecting privacy in surveillance societies: the Federal Republic of Germany, Sweden, France, Canada, and the United States* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1989); James Rule, Douglas McAdam, Linda Stearns and David Uglow, *The politics of privacy: planning for personal data systems as powerful technologies* (New York: Elsevier, 1980).

technological change, nor with rampant commercial collection of data. Lobbying by the tech industry has meant little can be done to control the collection of personal information and the sale of it to others.

Some people know how to limit collection of data about themselves. When emailing, they use encryption. When searching the web, they do not use Google but instead a search engine like DuckDuckGo that does not save information about what sites they've visited, or Tor for greater security. They do not carry a smartphone all the time. They pay in cash. They do not use a credit card. I could go on, but before long these measures to avoid being monitored are so restrictive that few individuals, at least in cities, can maintain them. Ironically, evasive manoeuvres can themselves draw attention to those who use them.

There is another way to resist surveillance, which is to try to corrupt the data that is collected. When asked to insert your date of birth, you put in the wrong one. Likewise, with phone numbers, addresses and other personal information, including your name. When out in public, you occasionally use a disguise to fool security cameras. It might even be fun, but does it make a difference? Databases are filled with errors anyway. Will a few more really change things? If this sort of resistance became widely adopted, perhaps it would, but there is no sign of this.

More promising is what might be called people's surveillance: monitoring the activities of the rich and powerful. The usual sort of surveillance is undertaken by those with more power against those with less, for example by big corporations against consumers or by spy agencies against citizens. When citizens monitor police, that is

something different, and can have consequences. Think of the murder of George Floyd by a Minnesota police officer in 2020, in broad daylight. US police kill many citizens but few killings are recorded on video and uploaded for all to see, potentially leading to mass action.

The organisation Witness provides training in skills for recording human-rights abuses. It is an example of efforts towards people's surveillance. If mass surveillance can't be stopped, at least the playing field can be levelled a little.

Conclusion

For many decades, powerful groups have monitored the activities of others, for the purposes of control. Oppressive surveillance is nothing new. But over the years, with the aid of new technology, it has become much worse: more widespread, intrusive and difficult to understand. This has occurred without the emergence of a mass movement to counter it. Is surveillance getting worse? Definitely.

15
Terrorism

In 1982, an important book about terrorism was published. Written by Dutch researchers Alex Schmid and Janny de Graaf, it was titled *Violence as Communication.* Their argument was that the ultimate purpose of anti-government terrorism is not to kill people or cause damage. Killing and destruction are only the means, though incredibly harmful ones. The purpose is to send a message to audiences.

To use violence as a way of sending a message, the most potent amplifier is media coverage. Back in the 1980s, before the Internet and social media, "the media" meant the mass media: television, radio, newspapers. For the media, terrorism is big news. The subtitle of Schmid and de Graaf's book is *Insurgent Terrorism and the Western News Media.*[1]

Their argument is that the media, in covering terrorism, serve as unwitting or unconcerned conduits serving the terrorists' purposes. However, if journalists and editors ever read *Violence as Communication,* they never gave the book's analysis much coverage. Imagine a news anchor

---

1 Alex P. Schmid and Janny de Graaf, *Violence as communication: insurgent terrorism and the Western news media* (London: Sage, 1982). See also Brigitte L. Nacos, *Mass-mediated terrorism: the central role of the media in terrorism and counterterrorism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002); Joseph S. Tuman, *Communicating terror: the rhetorical dimensions of terrorism* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2003).

saying, “Our media coverage is one of the most important reasons why insurgents attack civilians. But we know you want to hear about these attacks, so we’ll keep reporting them. Terrorists can rely on us to send their messages.”

Governments have some power over the media. They pass laws against revealing secrets detrimental to national security, which is why a country’s media seldom reports on crimes by its own security forces. But there is no evidence that governments have ever tried systematically to discourage reporting of insurgent terrorism. Why is this?

The wrong message?

There is something strange about terrorism being a form of communication: it usually sends the wrong message. You might imagine that terrorists want to raise awareness about their cause. Tamils in Sri Lanka can use violence to promote their claims for independence and Sunnis in Iraq can use violence to challenge the Shia-dominated government. In these and other cases, violence against civilians sends a message for sure, but seldom the one seemingly intended. The message received is, most commonly, that the terrorists are ruthless, uncaring fiends who care nothing about human life or dignity.

This sending of the wrong message can be explained by “correspondent inference theory.” When people hear about a violent action, they often ignore or dismiss the stated intentions of the perpetrators, and instead assume the perpetrators’ purpose corresponds with their actions. When perpetrators use violence, people assume their purpose is to hurt people, and because intentionally hurting civilians is

so outrageous, people assume the perpetrators are bad people, even evil, rather than rational political campaigners.

This assumption was most dramatically shown after the 9/11 attacks on the Trade Towers in New York and the Pentagon in Washington. Let's set aside the Pentagon, which might be considered a military target. Nearly everyone in the Trade Towers was a civilian. The attack was assumed to be motivated by hatred for the United States and its values, hatred for freedom and justice.[2]

Actually, Osama bin Laden had clearly stated his motivations. One of them was to get US troops out of Saudi Arabia, the Islamic holy land. But in the US, this message was completely lost because political leaders and most of the media and population assumed the terrorists' motives corresponded with the violence of the act.[3]

Why use violence?

This leads to another question. Why would anyone use violence to send a message to audiences via media coverage when it is so likely the message will be misinterpreted? This perplexed me, especially after I developed a model of outrage management, also known as the backfire model. When someone does something harmful to others — theft, beating, murder, torture — they typically try to reduce public outrage over their actions, and there are several common

2 Ziauddin Sardar and Merryl Wyn Davies, *Why do people hate America?* (Cambridge: Icon, 2002).

3 Max Abrahms, "Why terrorism does not work," *International Security,* vol. 31, no. 2, Fall 2006, pp. 42–78, applies correspondent inference theory to terrorism.

methods for doing this. One is cover-up, so people don't know what happened or who is responsible. Murderers who try to get away with it usually try to hide their role, for example hiding the body. Another method is to lie about what happened, saying that someone else is responsible or that they acted in self-defence. These are methods of "reinterpretation," explaining what happened in a different way, namely in a way other than the interpretation that an injustice has been done.

When the perpetrator is a powerful group, such as a government or corporation, then more methods are available to dampen outrage. When governments organise killings, they can devalue the targets, saying they are vermin or criminals — or terrorists. They can intimidate targets and their supporters by making threats of legal action, arrests or further violence. They can set up tribunals to give the appearance of justice without the substance. I and others documented the use of all these techniques by perpetrators of police beatings, massacres, torture and genocide.[4]

But there is one conspicuous exception: insurgent terrorism. These perpetrators don't try to hide their actions, but instead seek publicity. They don't try to blame others, but instead take responsibility. They have little power to devalue their targets or to set up tribunals that would exonerate themselves. What is driving these terrorists to flout the usual pattern of avoiding responsibility?

One explanation is that terrorism is expressive: it serves to give vent to emotional drives, for revenge or overcoming impotence. Another is that terrorism affirms

4 "Backfire materials," https://www.bmartin.cc/pubs/backfire.html

masculinity. Yet another is that it is a form of altruism, of sacrificing oneself for the group.[5] Terrorism can also be a way of mobilising support and increasing power vis-à-vis rivals.

As well, one explanation has a strategic rationale: blatantly attacking a more powerful group can trigger a violent, aggressive response, and this may lead to greater support for the challengers. Remember the US government's response to the 9/11 attacks: a military assault on the Taliban in Afghanistan, and later the invasion of Iraq. These massive responses caused widespread hostility throughout the region. The victims of these wars saw Western militaries as the perpetrators of a crime, not as righteous defenders against attack.

What to do

The standard government response to terrorism is to use the power of the state to identify, track down and neutralise actual and potential terrorists, if possible preventing their attacks. The US government uses electronic surveillance to track suspected terrorists and drones to assassinate them.[6]

---

5 Adolf Tobeña, "Suicide attack martyrdoms: temperament and mindset of altruistic warriors," in Barbara Oakley, Ariel Knafo, Guruprasad Madhavan and David Sloan Wilson (eds.), *Pathological Altruism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 207–224.

6 Critical examinations of US anti-terrorism include Spencer Ackerman, *Reign of terror: how the 9/11 era destabilized America and produced Trump* (New York: Viking, 2021); John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart, *Chasing ghosts: the policing of terrorism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Joseba Zulaika, *Terrorism:*

A different sort of approach is to reduce the incentives for terrorism by offering other ways to achieve goals. This is a big topic, so all I'll do here is pluck out one quote that struck me as sensible: "The best solution to political terrorism is to provide a place, within the country's political system, for persons with dissenting, and even radical, views."[7] The idea is that if radicals feel they have a voice in the system, they won't feel the need to use violence. However, most governments put far more effort into repressing terrorists than in opening political spaces for them.

Terrorism trends and definitions

Is terrorism getting better or worse? There's one straightforward way to answer: just consult one of the databases of terrorist attacks. A good one is the Global Terrorism Database, which includes information about more than 75,000 attacks. You can search the database by country, attack type, weapon type, perpetrator, casualties and other criteria. The data goes back to 1970, so I searched for deaths per year across the world. In 1970, there were less than a thousand. Year by year, the death count increased, reaching

---

the self-fulfilling prophecy (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2014); the journal *Critical Studies on Terrorism.*

7 Franco Ferracuti, "Ideology and repentance: terrorism in Italy," in Walter Reich (ed.), *Origins of terrorism: psychologies, ideologies, theologies, states of mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 59–64, at p. 62. Ferracuti says that the Italian government, by allowing escape routes for terrorists — lower penalties for informing and leaving — cut the incident rate dramatically.

a peak of over 40,000 in the mid 2010s before declining a bit. The overall assessment is obvious: there are more attacks, deaths and injuries than there used to be. Terrorism is getting worse.

However, there's a problem: not everyone agrees on the definition of terrorism.[8] Using the Global Terrorism Database's definition, the trends are clear, but there are dozens of different definitions. If there's no agreement on what it is, how can we decide whether there's more or less of it?

Historically, the label "terror" referred to actions by governments, originally in the French Revolution. After overthrowing the feudal regime, France's new rulers instituted what was called "The Terror," which included beheading enemies of the revolution. Later on, the meaning of terrorism shifted from referring to governments attacking their opponents to opponents attacking governments. This shift was advantageous to governments, because only the actions of their opponents were stigmatised. During the Vietnam War, the US government called the Viet Cong terrorists. In South Africa under apartheid, the government called the African National Congress terrorists. In the Philippines, the government refers to armed rebels as terrorists.

I sent an early draft of this chapter to Richard Jackson, editor of *Critical Studies on Terrorism.* He pointed me to several sources that raise doubts about the official figures on terrorism, and their implications.

---

8 Lisa Stampnitzky, *Disciplining terror: how experts invented "terrorism"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

Political scientist John Mueller wrote a book titled *Overblown* in which he argued that the alarm about terrorism in the US, especially after 9/11, is completely out of proportion to the actual danger.[9] By his assessment, terrorists do not have the capacity to kill lots of people. Even including the large 9/11 casualty figures, more US citizens die from drowning in bathtubs than die from terrorism. His assessment in 2006 was that there were probably no terrorist cells in the US, and nothing since has contradicted this.

Beyond this critique, Mueller argues that the government response to terrorism is more harmful than terrorist attacks themselves, in terms of cost, priorities, lives and reducing terrorist threats. He argues that policing is an appropriate response rather than war-making.

Another critical perspective is provided by philosopher Robert Goodin. He tries to get to the bottom of what, in the standard view, is especially wrong with terrorism, beyond killing and maiming people. If it is to obtain a political advantage by frightening people, this is exactly what governments regularly do — but when governments go to war, it isn't called terrorism. Goodin presents an irony: when Western governments wage wars against terrorism, they are doing some of the same things they accuse terrorists of doing. He says anyone who aims to

9 John Mueller, *Overblown: how politicians and the terrorism industry inflate national security threats, and why we believe them* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

frighten people to serve their own interests is committing a crime against the principles of democracy.[10]

Joseba Zulaika, who has written extensively on Basque terrorism, has pointed out how definitions of terrorism change:

> While a 1979 CIA report on terrorism claimed that there had been 3,336 terrorist incidents since 1968, the 1980 report claimed that there were 6,714 incidents *over the same period.* The doubling of terrorism was the result of including "threats" and "hoaxes" in the statistics.[11]

Richard Jackson, in addition to recommending work by Mueller, Goodin and Zulaika, offered some comments of his own:

> From this perspective [of changing definitions], the data on terrorism is rather skewed and distorted. It's also distorted in terms of its non-state actor focus, and the fact that if it isn't reported in mainstream (usually Western) media, it doesn't get counted. This is why so few incidents were recorded in Africa for many decades. Additionally, it used to be the case that terrorist incidents were only counted in peacetime; incidents during wars were counted as war events. One

10 Robert E. Goodin, *What's wrong with terrorism?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006).

11 Joseba Zulaika, *Terrorism: the self-fulfilling prophecy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 17 (emphasis in the original).

of the reasons the numbers have been high since 2003 is that most of the insurgency against the US in Iraq and Afghanistan has been recorded as acts of terrorism, when in fact, most terrorism scholars would not include it. In any event, the consensus among many terrorism scholars I know is that the high point of terrorism was actually the 1980s, and while the number of fatalities per incident has since gone up, the actual amount of terrorism we face today is lower than previous eras.

State terrorism

If we think of terrorism as actions that cause people to be terrified, then governments can be terrorists. After all, a bomb exploding nearby is just as terrifying regardless of who was responsible.

Beginning in the 1980s, a few scholars began researching what they called "state terrorism," which refers to actions by governments that strike terror into populations, for example torture, bombings and murders.[12] These scholars recognise terrorism by anti-state groups, but focus on

12 Ruth Blakeley, *State terrorism and neoliberalism: the North in the South* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009); Frederick H. Gareau, *State terrorism and the United States: from counterinsurgency to the War on Terrorism* (Atlanta, GA: Clarity Press, 2004); Alexander George (ed.), *Western state terrorism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991); Michael Stohl and George A. Lopez (eds.), *The state as terrorist: the dynamics of governmental violence and repression* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1984); Michael Stohl and George A. Lopez (eds.), *Terrible beyond endurance? The foreign policy of state terrorism* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1988).

parallel actions by states themselves. Ironically, state terrorism is often justified as anti-terrorism. The US-government-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 was portrayed as a response to al Qaeda terrorism, but the label "terrorism" was never applied to US military actions that killed, in the first six months, more civilians than died in the 9/11 attacks.

So there's a different question. Is state terrorism increasing or decreasing? I don't know of any systematic studies. This would require toting up the toll from massacres, wars, genocides, torture and other human rights violations. Without going into details, one thing is obvious: state terrorism is vastly more extensive and damaging than non-state terrorism.

This is illustrated most dramatically by nuclear weapons which, arguably, are a prime source of terror.[13]. Weirdly, nonviolent protest is sometimes called terrorism. Frank Donner wrote in 1980 that in the US, anti-terrorism was used as an excuse for spying on and neutralising non-violent anti-nuclear protest movements.[14]

Conclusion

Has terrorism gotten better or worse in the past half century? This is not really the best way to express the question. What most people want to know is whether the

13 Joel Kovel, *Against the state of nuclear terror* (London: Pan, 1983).

14 Frank J. Donner, *The age of surveillance: the aims and methods of America's political intelligence system* (New York: Knopf, 1980), p. 460.

danger from terrorism is greater or less, and that depends on what sort of terrorism we're talking about.

Non-state terrorism, against civilians, continues worldwide, but whether it is worse than before is questionable, given changing definitions. Is this sort of terrorism getting any more effective? Probably not, especially given the development of anti-terrorism and counter-terrorism methods and capacity. One important change over recent decades, especially since 11 September 2001, is that anti-terrorism and counter-terrorism have become vastly greater enterprises.

Then there's state terrorism, the sort that results from wars, genocide and repression. It continues to be far greater than non-state terrorism.

Another thing that hasn't changed much is the role of the media. Non-state terrorism continues to be big news. An attack that kills a few individuals, and occurs in a Western country, can generate headlines. Schmid and de Graaf analysed terrorism as "violence as communication" in 1982, and little is different today. Governments and the media mostly ignore state violence or, when it's assumed to be for a good cause, support it. Drone killings are not publicised, and there's little media coverage, especially of civilian casualties.

The media continue to give saturation coverage to non-state terrorism because that's what appeals to audiences. If you want to help discourage insurgent terrorism, one option is to not pay so much attention to it. A cynic might say that governments don't mind the media attention to non-state terrorism, because it justifies their own threats and uses of violence, which are far greater.

There's another thing that hasn't changed in decades. "Terrorism" continues to be a stigmatising label, applied only to opponents.

16
War

October 1962 was the time of the Cuban missile crisis. The Soviet government was placing nuclear missiles in Cuba and the US government treated this as a threat not to be tolerated. Never mind that US nuclear missiles were in Turkey, close to the Soviet Union.

As Soviet ships travelled towards Cuba, US leaders announced a blockade and a showdown loomed, likely to lead to nuclear war. Luckily the Soviets backed down and war was averted. Later, US nuclear weapons in Turkey were withdrawn, without publicity.

At the time, nuclear arsenals were far greater in megatonnage than today. A global nuclear war would have killed hundreds of millions of people, perhaps billions, from blast, heat and fallout, and there might have been a "nuclear winter" caused by dust and smoke lofted into the upper atmosphere, blocking out sunlight and leading to cold, dark, loss of crops and possible starvation for untold others.[1]

Some commentators say this was the closest the world has come to global nuclear war, with the chance of it occurring at the time having been maybe one in two. Many of us are plain lucky to be alive today.

The Cuban missile crisis wasn't the only occasion there was a risk of nuclear war. There have been numerous

---

1 Look up "nuclear winter" and you'll find lots of references.

other incidents, including red alerts due to mistaken reports of enemy attacks. On several occasions, US leaders considered launching nuclear strikes, for example during the Vietnam War, but advisers persuaded them not to. In relation to avoiding nuclear war, has the world been getting better or has it just been lucky?

Strangelove

6 August is the anniversary of the 1945 atomic bombing of Hiroshima, and a regular occasion for anti-war events. In Canberra in the late 1970s, I helped organise some Hiroshima Day activities, and one year we screened the classic film *Dr. Strangelove,* a bitter satire on US nuclear war politics. The central message of the film is that using nuclear weapons is insane. The central character, played by Peter Sellers, is indeed a lunatic, a humorously exaggerated version of the sober figures undertaking nuclear war planning. The full title of the film is *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb.*

A scene from the climax of *Dr. Strangelove*

In other anti-nuclear meetings, we screened *The War Game,* a fictional portrayal of Britain in the aftermath of a nuclear war, showing how the government used its power to control the population. It made the point that nuclear war would have devastating political consequences in addition to the well-known impacts on human life and the environment.

We also screened *Hiroshima,* a documentary about the impacts of the atomic bomb dropped on the city in 1945. It includes gruesome footage of victims whose skin was flayed by blast and heat.

A few years later, in the early 1980s, a huge movement against nuclear war emerged, with millions of people protesting in countries around the world. But by the late 1980s, the movement was in decline, and with the end of the Cold War in 1989, it faded to insignificance. It seemed that the threat of nuclear war had disappeared, but of course it hadn't gone away, because thousands of nuclear weapons remained in arsenals.

Are *Dr. Strangelove, The War Game* and *Hiroshima* still relevant today? I think so. The governments of the US, Russia, Britain, France, China, Israel, India, Pakistan and North Korea show no sign of getting rid of their nuclear arsenals. They might downsize in total numbers while "modernising" the weapons and delivery systems, making them more precise and reliable. In the 1960s, the main danger was nuclear war between the US and the Soviet Union. Now, with weapons in more countries, there are more potential flashpoints.

Deterrence?

During the Cold War, the rationale for maintaining nuclear arsenals was deterrence. The leaders of each side knew, supposedly, that initiating a nuclear strike on the enemy could lead to a devastating counter-strike on their country's own population. It was sometimes said, "In nuclear war, there are no winners," but this hasn't stopped preparations.

The logic of mutually assured destruction, or MAD, was always suspect.[2] If deterrence is such an effective process, then surely it would be safer if more governments had nuclear weapons, so nuclear war would be even less likely. The major nuclear powers have not seen it this way, instead trying to discourage other governments from acquiring nuclear weapons, most notably through the Nonproliferation Treaty.

That deterrence is not the only game in town is also shown by preparations for undertaking a "first strike" against other countries' nuclear facilities. In this, there is one saving grace: many nuclear launch facilities are distant from major population centres, which means a first strike would not kill as many people. However, if the first strike is less than fully successful, the enemy's remaining weapons might be used against the first-striker's population centres. That's the whole point of assured destruction. The next step in the logic is to ask whether the attack is "worth it," namely whether the destruction from the enemy's

2 For detailed, devastating critiques of deterrence see David P. Barash, *Threats: intimidation and its discontents* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020); Philip Green, *Deadly logic: the theory of nuclear deterrence* (Ohio State University Press, 1966).

counter-strike is a price worth paying for destroying most of its weapons. If a nuclear winter ensues, perhaps it would be prudent to have stockpiles of food in bomb shelters.

After a while, the logic of nuclear war-fighting starts to become confusing or numbing. The fundamental trouble is that this is war-planner "logic", whereas the lives affected are those of the general population. Some people say that if national leaders want to duke it out among themselves, go ahead, just don't involve the rest of us.

Biowar

Another danger is biological warfare. Infectious agents can be released to disable the enemy. So far, biowar has not been a major concern, and there are treaties restricting biowar research, but the risk remains.

One theory about Covid-19 is that it resulted from an accidental release from the Wuhan Institute of Virology, where research was being carried out to make bat coronaviruses more lethal. This research was partly funded by US groups, and there might have been involvement by the Chinese military. How could this have occurred if there's a ban on biowar research? The answer is that some research has both civilian and military applications. One rationale for studying lethal bioagents is to develop countermeasures.

Has the danger from biowar been increasing or decreasing? That's hard to say, but it's not going away, given that sophisticated methods of manipulating genetic materials are becoming more widely available.

One of the great triumphs of medical science was the eradication of the deadly disease smallpox. But the smallpox virus has not been entirely eliminated: there are stocks

held in US and Russian labs, so vaccines can be produced if necessary.

Conventional weapons

Nuclear, chemical and biological weapons are sometimes called weapons of mass destruction, even though only nuclear weapons have ever been shown to cause widespread devastation. Anyway, other sorts of weapons are called "conventional." This includes guns and bombs, with various delivery systems including land mines, bazookas, tanks, artillery, aeroplanes, drones and missiles. They might be conventional but they can be deadly, and indeed they are responsible for most of the direct deaths, injuries and destruction due to wars around the world.

Scientists and engineers are constantly working on ways to make weapons more effective. One innovation was the fuel-air explosive, enabling massive destruction comparable to a mini-nuclear weapon.

Has war using conventional weapons been getting more common or more deadly? For answers, it's possible to consult various sources. The Peace Research Institute Oslo, widely known as PRIO, calculated battlefield deaths from 1946 to 2008, showing ups and downs, with a downward trend overall, especially on a per-capita basis.[3] But in many wars, civilian casualties greatly outnumber battlefield deaths. The Uppsala Conflict Data Program

3 PRIO Battledeaths Dataset, https://www.prio.org/data/1. Nils Petter Gleditsch informs me that wars after 2008, notably in Syria and Ukraine, have caused upticks in the time series, though nothing like those due to the wars in Korea and Vietnam.

offers many informative charts.[4] One shows the number of armed conflicts worldwide increasing since World War II, reaching over fifty per year. The increase is partly because there are more countries than there used to be. One Uppsala chart shows an increasing number of total deaths per year from war, though as a percentage of the world's population this isn't quite as dramatic.

It's not straightforward to calculate the number of wars, deaths and other statistics. There are definitional issues, including what to include in totals. Many tables do not show deaths from disease and famine, common consequences of war.

Driving forces

Another way to think about war is in terms of "driving forces," which are factors that enable and promote war-making. There are also contrary forces that limit or discourage war-making.

An obvious factor is military expenditure, for armies and weapons and much else. Without the arms industry and without military training, war would be a very different process, perhaps with groups of civilians using hammers and knives to attack each other or their property. Well, that sounds silly. War without military weapons would be so different from today's wars that it would hardly warrant the name.

So, has military expenditure been getting larger or smaller? In dollar terms, it keeps growing, though as a

4 Uppsala Conflict Data Program, Department of Peace and Conflict Research, University of Uppsala, https://ucdp.uu.se.

fraction of the world's economic activity it remains pretty much the same. Note that considerable military expenditure is wasted on ineffective weapons systems or frittered away in corruption. And a lot of training and weaponry is never used in war.

On the other hand, weapons and training are improving all the time. It's now possible to produce missiles at a fraction of their cost in the 1960s, and killer drones are entirely new. Soldiers can now be trained to be better fighters. A study of US soldiers fighting in Europe in World War II found that only one in four on the front lines fired their rifles. Subsequently, by the 1970s, training techniques in the US army improved this to nine out of ten.[5] We can conclude that weapons are becoming ever more sophisticated and professional soldiers ever more skilled.

Does this mean wars are more likely, or more deadly? Not necessarily, because both sides in a war can benefit from the improvement in capacities, and presumably more powerful armies are stronger deterrents.

In modern war, carried out by militaries, the state plays a crucial role. States rely on militaries, and police, to maintain internal order, including to subdue challenges to rulers. When force is used against internal challengers, for example arresting, imprisoning, torturing and killing dissidents and political opponents, this is called repression. When force is used against external challenges, it's called war. It is significant that states, through their militaries, have this dual capacity. An authoritarian state would never

5 Dave Grossman, *On killing: the psychological cost of learning to kill in war and society* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1995).

disband its army because it would become vulnerable to challenge internally. And having an army threatens external enemies, which then become the rationale for maintaining an army for defence, though it also can be used for offence, completing the threat circularity.

The system of states that spans the globe is relatively new, just a few centuries old.[6] During this period, there was also the industrial revolution, enabling the manufacture of ever more deadly weapons, from the crossbow to machine guns to cruise missiles. Note that weapons development is itself a driver of technological innovation.[7]

The emergence of modern states also paralleled the rise of professional military forces, with recruitment, training and indoctrination. Around the world, there are millions of employees of governments and private firms all geared up to use armed force against opponents. Some are soldiers; many others are electricians, cooks, accountants and other trades, all to support a fighting capacity.

Another crucial part of the package is research and development for military purposes. Some of the world's

6 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991); Charles Tilly (ed.), *The formation of national states in Western Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975).

7 Matthew Evangelista, *Innovation and the arms race: how the United States and the Soviet Union develop new military technologies* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988); David Hambling, *Weapons grade: how modern warfare gave birth to our high-tech world* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2005); Maurice Pearton, *The knowledgeable state: diplomacy, war and technology since 1830* (London: Burnett, 1982).

brightest researchers devote their talents to figuring out how to make military forces more effective. Nuclear scientists and engineers investigate nuclear weaponry. Ballistics and metallurgical experts figure out how to make projectiles more potent in piercing armour. Computer specialists design communications systems. Psychologists find ways to enable teams of soldiers to maintain their morale. And so on. Military research and development is a massive enterprise that shapes the agendas of civilian researchers in quite a few fields by making military-related questions the ones of greatest significance.[8]

Beliefs are another component of worldwide military systems. The dominant belief within policy and military elite circles is that military power is needed to maintain peace, and the only way to deter or counter armed enemies is through superior force. It is taken for granted that a greater capacity and willingness to inflict violence will always overcome an opponent.

In this complex of the arms industry, state power, military research and beliefs about violence, alternatives receive little attention. Governments put the bulk of their funding into their militaries, not into diplomacy, foreign aid or peace education. Research into alternatives to war receives little support. Military heroes are lauded in books, films and commemorations; anti-war activists seldom are. The public is bombarded with information about war.

Karl Liebknecht wrote a book, *Militarism,* published in 1917. He argued that militarism is a form of political and

8 For example, Chandra Mukerji, *A fragile power: scientists and the state* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989).

economic domination, that the army serves to repress people "at home," and that military training serves to make members of the working class act against their class interest. He gave many examples of the military being used to repress workers. Some might conclude that little has changed in the past century, though conscription has been replaced, in many countries, by fully professional armed forces.

However, in the aftermath of World War II, something different happened. After previous wars, armies had been demobilised and factories returned to making civilian goods. In the US and some other countries after World War II, there was demobilisation but not to the same extent as previously. Instead, an unprecedented level of peacetime military "preparedness" was maintained, in what has been called a permanent war economy.[9] US President Dwight D. Eisenhower's famous warning about the military-industrial complex (MIC) was in 1960. If anything, this complex has become more entrenched and all-engrossing in subsequent decades — and it has become a global enterprise, not just based in separate countries.

The MIC has an interest in continued alarms about foreign threats that help to maintain spending. Actual wars

9 Seymour Melman, *The permanent war economy: American capitalism in decline* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974). For a highly readable account of US military policy and operations, see Rosa Brooks, *How everything became war and the military became everything: tales from the Pentagon* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016).

are even more beneficial to arms manufacturers: destruction of weapons in war means new orders.

The peace movement

February 2003. For months, US and British leaders had been raising the alarm about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, claiming they necessitated an invasion. The Australian government looked like sending troops along for the ride, and in these countries and beyond there was mass opposition to the looming war.

In Wollongong, antiwar organisers called a rally and march on 8 February. Due to public sentiment, they hoped for a turnout larger than any previous peace protest, maybe as many as 1000. They were surprised and delighted when 5000 showed up. I was used to events with a few dozen participants; this was unprecedented.

The bigger event was a week later, in Sydney, a far larger city. After a rally, there was a march around a loop. I was towards the rear of the march, and the march leaders were returning before we got started. Hundreds of thousands attended. In many countries around the world, there were similar events. It was the largest antiwar protest in history and was exceptional in another way: it happened *before* fighting broke out.

Not long after, on 19 March, the invasion was launched. Saddam Hussein's army was quickly routed. No weapons of mass destruction were found. The war lacked a legal or military justification. Were the protesters right in saying "No blood for oil"?

Since then, I've talked with many opponents of the war who were despondent about antiwar protests. If the massive

rallies weren't enough to stop the invasion, what was the point? The peace movement had failed.

I had a different perspective, having examined what had happened as a result of the war.[10] Public opinion throughout the Islamic world, and beyond, turned sharply against the US. Today it's hard to remember, but at the time the US government had more support throughout the world than in living memory. That was because of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington DC, which generated enormous sympathy for Americans. The invasion of Iraq squandered this goodwill. Surveys revealed a dramatic decline in international public opinion about the US.

It's also hard to remember that US leaders had ambitious ideas about regime change in the Middle East. If the invasion of Iraq had gone according to their plans, next would have been Syria and Iran. But it was not to be. Iraq was conquered but an insurgency was triggered. The massive antiwar protests, and continuing protests in parts of the US after the invasion, meant US leaders should have been in no doubt about the unpopularity of their actions. Plans to openly overthrow more governments in the Middle East were set aside.

The peace movement had a big impact, but government leaders never admitted it in public. For years I've read, occasionally, about how social movements affect government policy-making but politicians refuse to acknowledge any influence. This is best documented by Lawrence Wittner's massive study of just one facet of peace activism:

---

10 "Iraq attack backfire," *Economic & Political Weekly,* vol. 39, no. 16, 17-23 April 2004, pp. 1577–1583.

that against nuclear weapons.[11] Published in three volumes over a decade, Wittner charts the rise and fall of anti-bomb activism, including protests in the late 1950s and early 1960s against atmospheric testing of nuclear weapons and massive protests against nuclear weapons in the early 1980s. Using material about deliberations within the US and others governments, he argues that when anti-bomb movements are most active, nuclear arms races are restrained, but when movements are less vocal, weapons developments continue or expand. He writes:

> This study — like its predecessors — indicates that the nuclear arms control and disarmament measures of the modern era have resulted primarily from the efforts of a worldwide citizens' campaign, the biggest mass movement in modern history. … concerned citizens played a central role in curbing the nuclear arms race and preventing nuclear war.[12]

In other words, without activism against the bomb, nuclear armaments would have been greater in number and more widespread among nations, and government officials would have been more willing to use them.

---

11 Lawrence S. Wittner, *The struggle against the bomb* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993–2003).

12 Lawrence S. Wittner, *The struggle against the bomb, volume three. Toward nuclear abolition: a history of the world nuclear disarmament movement, 1971 to the present* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 285.

During the Vietnam war, US military planners knew deploying nuclear weapons would trigger a massive public reaction in the US itself, and worldwide. The popular aversion to nuclear weapons is one reason they haven't been used since 1945. Protests against the war also contributed to the "Vietnam syndrome," public aversion to sending US troops to foreign wars. Popular movements against chemical and biological weapons, land mines and cluster bombs, among others, have reduced the acceptability of some types of weapons.

If anti-bomb protests have helped restrain nuclear arms races and prevent nuclear war, it is also plausible to think that peace activism more generally has been a major factor in controlling and stopping wars. Activism includes dramatic actions like standing in front of tanks and self-immolation (burning oneself to death). It also includes efforts in schools, neighbourhoods and families, with conversations, messages, petitions, delegations and campaigns. It includes support for soldiers who refuse to fight. If you start looking into peace activism, you will find amazing innovation, diversity and courage. You will also find that peace activists receive very little funding or official support compared to militaries.

Governments have to contend with peace activism, and also to contend with people's reluctance to support war. Large armies are hard to maintain without either conscription or attractive pay and conditions. Civilian populations need to be encouraged to support warmaking through clever appeals to patriotism and deceptive claims about the enemy. The field of propaganda was pioneered by the British government during World War I, and subsequently taken

up by advertisers and the Nazis.[13] Why would propaganda be needed unless war-making is simply not popular?

Armed struggle — war by insurgents against governments in power — has become less attractive over recent decades. One reason is the success of unarmed methods of struggle, which are now the preferred option in many anti-regime movements, as well as social movements more generally.[14] In liberation movements, waging war has less credibility as a means for achieving a better society, and that's a big change since the time of the Russian and Chinese revolutions. Mao Zedong said political power grows out of the barrel of a gun, but today's activists are more likely to say power comes from the gunless, namely from protests, strikes, boycotts and sit-ins.

Peace movements become highly visible only occasionally, such as before the 2003 invasion of Iraq, but efforts to promote peace and prevent war continue at other times. However, there is one way that peace activism has not changed all that much. It still remains underfunded and under-reported — and, when it becomes effective, detested by most governments.

Conclusion

My aim here is not to predict the future but rather to provide an assessment of whether things have become better or worse in relation to war. If we start this assessment in the

13 Tim Wu, *The attention merchants: the epic scramble to get inside our heads* (New York: Knopf, 2016).

14 Erica Chenoweth, *Civil resistance: what everyone needs to know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

aftermath of World War II, there has definitely been an improvement. It was the deadliest war in history and there has been nothing like it since. So far so good.

However, looking at the number of people killed each year from war, as a proportion of the population, is just one criterion. Another is the persistence of war-making. In this there has not been a dramatic change. In any given year, according to researchers, dozens of wars are taking place in the world, and this hasn't changed greatly over the years. Some wars end, others begin, and some seem interminable. If you lived in Afghanistan since 1979, you might get the feeling that war is a permanent feature.

In terms of weapons and other technologies, there have been enormous changes, for example the development of long-range guided missiles, digital surveillance and mini-nukes. Military training has undergone a revolution, with many more soldiers acquiring advanced specialist skills. In much of the world, war-making has become more professionalised.

In terms of the threat of catastrophic war, it's hard to say whether things are much different. In 1962, a global nuclear war was avoided, barely, and since then there have been no further episodes with a similar risk, at least that are publicly known. So it might be said that the chance of catastrophic war has been less since 1962, but it still remains. If nuclear winter researchers are right, even a limited nuclear war could be catastrophic.

Finally, the driving forces behind war, including the system of states, militaries, weapons development, belief systems and the military-industrial complex, have not changed greatly.

Meanwhile, highly visible peace movements have their ups and downs, and continue without much funding or institutional support. Governments generously fund militaries but give little money or status to peace movements. If several governments decided to wind down their militaries and use the money saved to support peace initiatives, we might say things had changed a lot. A nice thought, but so far it's wishful thinking.

17
Work

In 1930, John Maynard Keynes, the eminent British economist, predicted that in the next century the working week would be drastically reduced, perhaps to 15 hours.[1] Well, it hasn't happened, despite detailed arguments about its feasibility.[2] The world's economies are vastly more productive than decades ago, yet the work week hasn't declined all that much. Why not?

The word "work" can bring up all sorts of thoughts.

At its best, work can be highly satisfying, so engrossing that it leads to a flow state in which time flies. For many people, work is a source of identity and self-worth, and a place for social connection, for engaging with co-workers, clients, customers and others.

On the negative side, it might be felt as an onerous obligation, an activity that is exhausting or boring, something done only for the money.[3] There's only one thing worse than work, and that's not having any, of being unemployed, without a "gainful occupation." This is a generalisation, of

---

1 Lorenzo Pecchi and Gustavo Piga (eds.), *Revisiting Keynes: economic possibilities for our grandchildren* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).

2 William McGaughey, Jr., *A shorter workweek in the 1980's* (White Bear Lake, MN: Thistlerose Publications, 1981).

3 Daniel S. Levine, *Disgruntled: the darker side of the world of work* (New York: Berkley Boulevard Books, 1998).

course, and plenty of people get along fine without a paid job. But let's not forget unpaid work, including housework and child-rearing, and volunteer activities, the sort of work many are eager to do.

Is work getting better? To address this impossibly general question, it's useful to break it down into a few components, including time, payment and satisfaction.

Jobs

In any discussion of work, it's hard to avoid referring to jobs. In the economic system, a job has two aspects: doing work and receiving payment. Obvious enough, but it involves a questionable assumption.

Look at it this way. The economy serves two functions. One is to produce the things that people need and want: food, shelter and all sorts of consumer goods, plus roads, medicines, weapons and much else. The other function of the economy is to distribute the goods and services that are produced to individuals and groups.

Jobs seem to combine both functions. You work in a factory producing paperclips and you receive a wage enabling you to buy groceries. Your job is part of the two systems of production and allocation. If you're a teacher — maybe you run training workshops for executives — you're contributing to the economy's productive capacity, and receiving a salary commensurate with your contribution.

Wait a moment! I just made a dubious assumption. Since when is your salary "commensurate with your contribution"? This is an aspect of the ideology of jobs, a belief

system that keeps people from questioning the economic system.[4]

For people who have jobs, who do work for pay, there seems to be a connection between the work and the pay. It's obvious, except there are too many exceptions. First, consider work that people do for little or no pay. Parents looking after children is the classic example. If all parents went on strike, the children would be abandoned, or someone would have to be found, and perhaps paid, to look after them. There are other examples. Much free and open source software is written by volunteers, and it makes an important contribution to productivity.[5] Indeed, if no one was paid to write software, there would be enough free software to handle most tasks.

The other side of the equation is pay for work, except there are plenty of people who receive income but do little or no work. Some inherit wealth. Others own shares in companies and live off the income. Many others are retired and survive on their pensions. And many more are supported by family members who have a paid job. You might say that some or all of these individuals deserve what they receive, but that's not the point, which is that having a paid job is, for them, not how they obtain money or the things money can buy.

To sum up: jobs supposedly serve a double function. They get the work done to produce everything needed in the economy, and they are the method of allocating all the things produced to individuals and groups. Except this only

4 P. D. Anthony, *The ideology of work* (London: Tavistock, 1977).

5 See the chapter on IP.

seems to be the case, because lots of work isn't paid and lots of people are paid but don't work for it.

What happens if we break the double function into two separate matters? What if everyone received an income independent of work? This would take the pressure off people to find a paid job. Some would be satisfied with a modest income and just spend the whole day playing video games or relaxing in the park. Others, though, would be able to follow their passion, whether it is making art, helping children or protecting the environment.

I've known a few activists who relied on unemployment payments. They were working just as hard as well-paid corporate lobbyists. However, Australian governments have introduced more stringent requirements for receiving unemployment payments, and some recipients are forced to apply for jobs. The irony is that such activists work very hard, just not in an area where it is easy to find a paying job.

Now think of a strange phenomenon: when labour-saving technologies are introduced, there are screams that workers will lose their jobs. Indeed, jobs are the rationale trotted out whenever employers ask for government subsidies to keep operating. This is completely rational in a world in which paid jobs are seen to perform the double function of production and allocation.

Using a different set of assumptions, labour-saving technology should be a cause for celebration. It should mean that paid work can be reallocated, with fewer hours in the standard working week, enabling a better work-life balance.

Decades ago, I read a book titled *The World's Wasted Wealth.*[6] The author examined economies in rich countries and found whole sectors that are unnecessary or wasteful, with case studies of insurance, law, transport, agriculture, medicine and welfare.

Think of advertising. Much of it is not about the basic function of informing consumers about the availability of products and services, but about encouraging them to buy, often what they don't need. Many ads encourage people to feel they are deficient and need a product or service to fix the deficiency: a deodorant, cleaning product, piece of clothing, car, electronic device or foreign holiday. They also encourage people to measure their worth in terms of possessions and how they compare with their neighbours.[7]

Imagine an advertisement showing a few friends having a picnic in a public park, with the message that having good relationships brings greater happiness than

6 J. W. Smith, *The world's wasted wealth 2: save our wealth, save our environment* (Cambria, CA: Institute for Economic Democracy, 1994).

7 See for example Marc Andrews, Matthijs van Leeuwen and Rick van Baaren, *Hidden persuasion: 33 psychological influence techniques in advertising* (Amsterdam: BIS, 2013); Martin P. Davidson, *The consumerist manifesto: advertising in postmodern times* (London: Routledge, 1992); Stuart Ewen, *Captains of consciousness: advertising and the social roots of the consumer culture* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1976); Fred Inglis, *The imagery of power: a critique of advertising* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1972); Andrew Wernick, *Promotional culture: advertising, ideology and symbolic expression* (London: Sage, 1991).

having more possessions, as shown by research. Well, we're not going to see many such ads, because no one can make money from them.

There should be a book with the title *The World's Wasted Work,* documenting how much work is pointless, of no benefit to anyone. The closest thing is *Bullshit Jobs* by David Graeber, who estimated that half of employed people thought their jobs were pointless.[8] I don't know whether this is accurate or applies beyond industrialised countries, but it does connect with something familiar to most workers: essential tasks could be completed much more quickly and efficiently than they are.

This reminds me of the efficiency expert who asked a worker what she did, and she said "Nothing." Then he asked another worker, and he said "Nothing." The expert said, "Aha — duplication."

If there's a lot of waste in production and a lot of unproductive working time, the implication is that modern industrial economies could easily produce enough goods for everyone, or working hours could be drastically cut, or both. The problem, some critics say, is that the economic system is based on an assumption of scarcity, when actually there is abundance. Is that the problem? Or is economic inequality at the core? If some people have vastly more wealth than others, and some are in poverty, how can this be maintained except by the ideology of jobs? Another explanation is that the population needs to be chained to the production system, because if people have too much leisure

8 David Graeber, *Bullshit jobs: a theory* (Penguin, 2019).

time, some of them will have spare energy to campaign for a system change.

For my purposes, there's no need for a full explanation for why Keynes' prediction of reduced working hours has not come true. The reality, in much of the world, is that most people want a job, many people find their jobs unfulfilling, and the only thing worse than an unfulfilling job is not having a job at all.

The bureaucratic experience

Many people, when they hear the word "bureaucracy," think of government, especially of all those annoying procedures encountered when trying to get service concerning welfare, travel, taxation and policing. This is a reasonable way of thinking, but for sociologists — scholars who study social systems — "bureaucracy" has a somewhat different meaning. It is a way of organising work with two main characteristics: hierarchy and a division of labour. In other words, there are bosses and subordinates, and workers have specialised tasks.

With this definition, all sorts of organisations are bureaucracies, including the military, corporations, police, churches, schools, and most large trade unions and non-profit organisations. What aren't bureaucracies? Families, and some volunteer groups, professional associations and small businesses.

Many people spend their working lives as cogs in a bureaucracy. And not as vital cogs, but replaceable ones. No single worker is essential in a bureaucracy: each one, including top managers, can be replaced.

Back in the late 1970s, I became interested in how bureaucracies operate, because they played such a powerful role in environmental problems.[9] One book I read was *The Bureaucratic Experience* by Ralph Hummel. In my notes taken at the time, I described it as "a very readable and insightful book detailing the essential characteristics of bureaucracy from a critical perspective." I copied out a few passages from the book. Hummel wrote that "People's work is divided, not only to make them expert and more efficient, but to make them dependent on managerial control."[10] In other words, work is organised not just for efficiency but to ensure continuation of hierarchy and the power of managers over subordinates.

Hummel also wrote, "The interaction between the division of labor on rational grounds and the management of divided labor by hierarchy is the basis for the scope, intensity, and controlability of modern bureaucracy as the power instrument without compare."[11] This is a point about how the structure of a bureaucratic workplace — hierarchy and the division of labour — makes the entire organisation a ready tool for whoever runs it. This is most obvious with the military. When the top brass, or political overseers, decide what the army should do, this is what it does, with soldiers following the orders of their commanders, from the top to the bottom. The army goes to war, or not, or represses

9 Our local Friends of the Earth did a project on this: "Bureaucracy," https://www.bmartin.cc/pubs/85bureaucracy.html

10 Ralph P. Hummel, *The bureaucratic experience* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977), p. 30.

11 Ibid., p. 80.

popular protest, or not, according to what those running it say. It is possible for subordinates to resist, but that can be risky. They can lose their jobs or, in the army, lose their liberty.

Back to Hummel, bureaucracy and work. He wrote that purposelessness and meaninglessness are an unavoidable result of organisations constructed on bureaucratic principles, and therefore the task of providing meaning for workers was nearly impossible to achieve.

What has happened since *The Bureaucratic Experience* was first published? I was surprised to find that Hummel's book went into five editions. With the passing of years, he was in a good position to assess changes.

In the fifth edition, Hummel seems, if anything, more critical of bureaucracy than before. He focuses on the implications of the bureaucratic form for human freedom, covering ideas from psychoanalysis, linguistics and administration, and surveying the ideas of key figures in both modernism and post-modernism, for example Max Weber, Martin Heidegger, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida.

Hummel says it is a misunderstanding to think that bureaucrats are people like us; instead, the correct understanding is that "Bureaucrats are a new personality type, headless and soulless."[12] Here is Hummel's summary of the costs of bureaucracy:

12 Ralph P. Hummel, *The bureaucratic experience: the post-modern challenge* (London: Routledge, 2015; first published in 2008 by M. E. Sharpe), p. 9.

> • *Socially,* bureaucracy cancels *who* you are and tells you *what* you are — your assigned role in the program or the job.
> • *Culturally,* the substance of what is worthwhile to you is translated into a formal shadow of your values: for example, justice into law.
> • *Psychologically,* you are asked to surrender your full personality to fit into program or job identity.
> • *In speaking,* you learn a strange new language that enables you to speak without meaning what you say.
> • *In thinking,* you learn to be strictly logical — even if the result makes no sense.
> • *Politically,* you accept being managed and are taught to despise politics because it falls far short of rational administration.[13]

In Hummel's pessimistic vision, bureaucracies are preparing us for tyranny. In this process, work isn't getting any better.

Working hours

In her classic book *More Work for Mother,* Ruth Schwartz Cowan examined the impact of "labour-saving" technology in the home, things like vacuum cleaners, washing machines and dishwashers.[14] Paradoxically, in the US these

13 Ibid., p. 11.

14 Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More work for mother: the ironies of household tasks from the open hearth to the microwave* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

technologies have not led to dramatic decreases in the time spent on housework, mostly by mothers.

Cowan also examined options that might have saved time but never became standard, such as home delivery of cooked meals. This has finally become routine decades after it was technologically feasible. Maybe some successor to Cowan will examine whether home delivery reduces work at home.

More Work for Mother is just one aspect of the curious phenomenon that as societies become more affluent, average working hours don't decline proportionally, or even all that much. This is most dramatic in the US, which has one of the world's highest per-capita standards of living, yet some of the longest working hours in the industrialised world. Long ago, Juliet Schor wrote *The Overworked American,* documenting excessive working hours that seemed to defy what would be possible.[15]

It's hard to summarise the varied effects on working hours, but one thing seems clear. Keynes' forecast about the work week has not been borne out.

Control at work

There's another side to working hours: whether workers have control over them. In some occupations, workers can choose when they work, and often where. Some artists and researchers have this freedom. With the lockdowns imposed to control Covid-19, many more office workers were able to do their jobs at home.

---

15 Juliet B. Schor, *The overworked American: the unexpected decline of leisure time* (New York: BasicBooks, 1991).

At the other end of a spectrum of work control are jobs in the gig economy, for example home delivery, which are uncertain and sporadic, giving workers far less control over their hours than traditional 9-to-5 employees. To add to the complexity of working hours is communication technology. Even when at home, many workers now feel obligated to check emails and arrange meetings outside official working hours.

Half a century ago, a fascinating article about jobs in the steel industry appeared. The author, Katherine Stone, challenged the usual idea that the different sorts of jobs in the industry are a result of steel-making technology.[16]

Focusing on the US, she described how in the 1800s, skilled workers controlled production using capital from employers. To expand production, employers moved to break this system and introduce labour-saving technology, in the process turning both skilled and unskilled workers into semi-skilled. The employers, to justify their control over production, divided workers by introducing wage-incentive schemes. They also introduced opportunities for promotion, to harness the psychology of workers, encouraging self-seeking over solidarity. The result was what is called an "internal labour market": within each firm, workers sought personal advancement. In addition, a new

16 Katherine Stone, "The origins of job structures in the steel industry," *Review of Radical Political Economics,* vol. 6, no. 2, Summer 1974, pp. 113–173. See also Stephen A. Marglin, "What do bosses do? The origins and functions of hierarchy in capitalist production," *Review of Radical Political Economics,* vol. 6, no. 2, Summer 1974, pp. 60–112.

set of roles was introduced: management. This was fostered by new methods of training, re-education of foremen, and recruitment of new types of managers.

Overall, Stone argued that the division of labour separating mental from physical work was artificial and unnecessary, serving to maintain the power of employers. She concluded that this system, developed in the years 1900–1920 under what is commonly called "scientific management," remained decades later, when she wrote her article. She noted that the impact of unions was to further cement the system of job classifications in a hierarchy in which shop-floor workers are pitted against management. She said that no labour or reform group had developed means for challenging this system, of moving to a different one in which workers controlled both their work and the way it was allocated.

Fast forward to today: has anything fundamentally changed? In most companies, there are job hierarchies, in which workers can rise, obtain more pay and status, and have power over subordinates. Unions can be more or less effective acting on behalf of their members within this system, but seldom do we hear of a union campaigning for a different goal, of getting rid of the layers of management and allowing workers to organise the work for themselves.

Challenges

All sorts of campaigners have pushed for different ways to organise work. There are some inspiring successes and all too many failures.

Consider shortening the working week, long a goal of workers and unions. As discussed, consumerism, status-

seeking and maintaining managerial power may be factors preventing greater movement towards shorter hours — for paid workers. Despite resistance, some advancements have been achieved, in some places. In Europe, average work weeks have declined. An associated benefit is that productivity usually is maintained.

A different challenge is questioning the ideology of work. Nearly a century ago, famous philosopher Bertrand Russell wrote an essay titled "In praise of idleness," arguing that modern machinery meant no one should be compelled to work for more than four hours daily, asserting that "The morality of work is the morality of slaves." He concluded his essay by saying, "Modern methods of production have given us the possibility of ease and security for all; we have chosen instead to have overwork for some and starvation for others. … In this we have been foolish, but there is no reason to go on being foolish for ever."[17] If Russell were alive today, he might wonder why the foolishness has persisted.

Why work hard? Why not slow down, enjoy life, and not worry so much about advancing in the rat race? This sounds nice in principle, and quite a few people drop out, quit their jobs, live off a small income, do less paid work and do more of what they love. Others stay on the job but just do the bare minimum necessary. Decades after Russell, this philosophy was endorsed by Corinne Maier in her book

17 Bertrand Russell, "In praise of idleness," *Harper's Magazine,* October 1932. Reprinted in Vernon Richards (ed.), *Why work? Arguments for the leisure society* (London: Freedom Press, 1983).

titled *Hello Laziness.*[18] It is a critique of work in business, delightfully irreverent and direct, and includes scathing commentary about the docility of workers and the inanity of much work.

So far, however, this challenge has not been coordinated. Some individuals reject the work-hard mentality, but this hasn't created a mass movement, enough to change the entire economy.

A completely different challenge is enlightened management. Some employers have introduced ways of running enterprises that make work so satisfying that nearly everyone on the job is enthusiastic. These companies are so attractive that few employees leave, and many are eager to work there.[19] The only question is why other companies haven't followed these inspirational examples. One answer is that the economic system is set up in a way that discourages employers from designing workplaces so that work is intensely satisfying.

Barry Schwartz says there are positive reasons for work, such as challenge and relationships, but few workers are driven primarily by positive reasons. Most do it for the money, and many jobs are soul-destroying. Yet making work satisfying also improves productivity, so what's going on with so many unsatisfying jobs? Part of the answer, Schwartz says, is a self-fulfilling belief system: managers believe that workers only care about financial rewards and

18 Corinne Maier, *Hello laziness: why hard work doesn't pay* (London: Orion Books, 2005).

19 For example, Ricardo Semler, *Maverick: the success story behind the world's most unusual workplace* (Warner, 1995).

therefore run workplaces with this assumption, and this creates conditions in which workers only work because of the money.[20] This is one explanation of why examples of inspirational workplaces have not generated a tidal wave for change.

There are also examples of workers taking over workplaces, abolishing the usual system of bosses and subordinates. When workers collectively make decisions about how to do the work, without bosses, it is called workers' control or workers' self-management, and this can make work more satisfying. There are many examples of factory takeovers, including country-wide, but most have been short-lived. Governments and employers nearly always oppose workers' control, including by use of force. When, as in former Yugoslavia, a government supports workers' self-management, it may impose controls that reduce the autonomy of workers.[21]

A Universal Basic Income (UBI) would provide every citizen with a guaranteed income, independently of whether they are in paid employment. It sounds expensive but maybe would not be in practice because there would be little or no need for unemployment and welfare payments and the bureaucratic systems that administer them. If the UBI is enough to live on, it could trigger big changes in employment patterns. Employers would need to make their most unpleasant jobs more attractive, with higher wages or

20 Barry Schwartz, *Why we work* (London: TED Books, 2015).

21 Immanuel Ness and Dario Azzellini, eds., *Ours to master and to own: workers' control from the Commune to the present* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2011).

better working conditions, or eliminate them altogether. Automation would no longer be a threat but rather a reason for raising the UBI.

There are some articulate advocates of a UBI, for example citing research showing that when poor people are given regular payments with no strings attached, most of them use the money responsibly.[22] The problem is not the arguments for a UBI but rather the resistance of employer groups. So far, steps in this direction have not made much headway.

Somewhat related to UBI is the gift economy. Imagine a massive expansion of collective goods and services. Already there are public libraries and public parks. In addition, imagine free public transport, low-cost housing, food banks, free child care, free basic clothing, and other free services. In such a society, it would be possible to live with little or no money. So how would anything get done? Many people, released from the necessity to work for pay, would volunteer their services, for the intrinsic satisfaction of helping others. This already happens to some extent. A great many people do volunteer work, for example for charities, sporting clubs and schools.

A model for the gift economy is blood donations. Richard Titmuss in a classic book argued that commercial systems for obtaining blood are far worse in every regard: wasteful, dangerous to donors and recipients, inequitable, fostering unethical behaviour, costly and discouraging

22 Rutger Bregman, *Utopia for realists* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), covers many of the points raised here.

altruism. Voluntary systems are far better.[23] Note that blood donation is different from most forms of altruism because the donor doesn't know the recipient, so there is no reciprocity. This is an example of how paying people leads to worse outcomes.

In many parts of the world, the gift economy is further away than ever. Corporations want to charge for goods and services, not give them away. Many scientists want to make money from their discoveries, rather than make them available free for the benefit of all.

Conclusion

Work is an important part of the lives of most adults. Paid work can be engaging and satisfying, but more commonly it is felt as a burden, as something necessary to earn money. Most economic systems are set up to perpetuate the continuation of the system of jobs that seems to serve the dual function of production and allocation. When automation makes it possible for goods to be produced in great quantity at modest costs, this causes a crisis — in allocation, because this is tied to job assignments. The result is that many jobs are now about managing the allocation of production, including jobs in finance, welfare, taxation and advertising.

There are quite a few options for making paid work better for workers — shorter work weeks, lower commitment, enlightened management, universal basic income, the gift economy — but only limited progress has been made in these directions. Many workplaces continue to be toxic,

23 Richard M. Titmuss, *The gift relationship: from human blood to social policy* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1970).

notably those in organisations structured according to bureaucratic principles.

Is work getting better for you? If so, you're one of the lucky ones. Would you keep working at your job if you weren't paid? Then you're one of the very lucky ones. Could you live without being paid for work? Maybe you're wealthy, retired or supported by a family member. If work is better for you, that's great, but for many others it isn't.

Overall, there's not much evidence that, over recent decades, work has gotten a lot better or a lot worse, in terms of duration, satisfaction or control. The main mystery is why it hasn't changed all that much.

18
Conclusion

Is the world going down the drain? On hearing about my project, some friends wanted to hear my overall assessment. Is the world better, worse — or much the same?

Thankfully, or so I think, there isn't any simple answer. Some things have been getting better and some getting worse. There are reasons for doom and gloom but also for optimism.

Another complication is that value judgements are involved. Surveillance may be increasing, but is this good or bad? If you're collecting data to prevent crimes, it's good, but if you're a civil liberties advocate, it's bad. Nearly every issue has this sort of complication.

Then there's another challenge: not everyone agrees about the way things have been going. Is feminism achieving its goals? In many ways, yes, but even among those who support feminist goals, this answer is contested.

I covered a range of topics, from climate to work, but there are others. Those I considered but didn't pursue include affluence, animal rights, dissent, drugs, economic inequality, exercise, LGBTIQ+, nonviolence, self-management, social defence and whistleblowing. And there are many others.

What I've learned

When first thinking about this project, I thought it would be useful to reflect on issues I had come across in my own life, going back half a century or so. I knew it would be challenging: each issue is so vast that it seems presumptuous to try to summarise it in a few thousand words and make an overall evaluation. But once I started writing, it didn't seem quite so hard. And it was more fascinating than I expected.

It's actually fairly easy to make judgements about the past. For many issues, the trends are obvious, for example that intellectual property is more expansive and average happiness levels haven't changed all that much. The hard part is trying to say something about what's been happening in relatively few words, and to make it interesting.

Patterns

In every case, whether things have improved depends on who you are. Concerning smoking, if you have lots of money invested in tobacco companies, your answer is likely to be different than if your closest mate is dying of a tobacco-related disease. This is the personal side of an issue. The world might be getting hotter, but maybe that's fine if you live in Siberia or the Yukon.

On the other hand, if you're worried about effects on everyone else, on humanity and the environment, then it's appropriate to look at overall impacts, on the effects of nuclear power or climate change on populations and beyond.

On nearly every issue, from happiness to death, there are different narratives, or stories, or perspectives. Concerning climate change, the dominant narrative is that

it is real, serious and needs to be addressed urgently, but there's also a contrary narrative that nothing significant is happening and that the whole alarm is a beat-up. Concerning intellectual property, IP, the industry narrative is that it's vital to the economy, and that infringing IP rights is a serious offence. There's also a contrary narrative that IP is a restraint on trade that serves powerful and wealthy industries at the expense of the commons, what should be the common wealth of society.

Two points are worth making about these sorts of divergent narratives. The first is to recognise that they exist, especially to identify the viewpoint that is usually submerged or invisible in most discussions. In media stories and everyday conversation, you are unlikely to hear about demarchy, deschooling, state terrorism or terror management theory. Whether or not you agree with the assumptions and goals involved in such perspectives, finding out about them offers a richer way to interpret dominant views. The second point is that after recognising divergent views, there is the challenge of assessing them. It is a challenge because some of those who support dominant views do what they can to marginalise alternatives, by discrediting them, censoring their expression and sometimes attacking their exponents. In some cases, the dominant view becomes part of people's thinking about the way the world is, indeed about the way the world must be. In this thinking, mental health is about the individual and making more money is needed to be happier. Those who question the conventional wisdom may be dismissed as disgruntled or deluded. Maybe they are, but this can be premature.

Shifting baselines?

When environmental conditions deteriorate over time, younger people may not realise how good it used to be, because they've only experienced degraded environments. There's a name for this: shifting baseline syndrome (SBS). It "describes a gradual change in the accepted norms for the condition of the natural environment due to lack of past information or lack of experience of past conditions."[1] SBS was first named in relation to fisheries, and there are quite a few studies showing that younger people are less aware of the reduction in the number of fish species or numbers.

Might SBS also apply to other domains? It's plausible that surveillance has become normalised, and people who have grown up with phones and social media have less idea of the level of privacy widely expected and experienced just a few decades ago. However, although this might seem plausible, research is needed to determine whether people have a different baseline for what is a normal level of surveillance, and what would seem to be a serious violation. Tim Wu, writing about the US, said "In the 1920s, the idea of advertising on radio was controversial if not contemptible."[2] Radio was a recent innovation, and many people felt it was suitable only for uplifting material, especially in the home, which was considered a private space not to be violated by commercial messages. Those days are long

1 Masashi Soga and Kevin J Gaston, "Shifting baseline syndrome: causes, consequences, and implications," *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment,* vol. 16, no. 4, 2018, pp. 222–230, at p. 222.

2 Tim Wu, *The attention merchants: the epic scramble to get inside our heads* (New York: Knopf, 2016), p. 86.

gone, and now videos about many previously private matters are readily available on little screens. Is this normalised? Does SBS apply more generally?

SBS can also be called creeping normality. In relation to happiness, it is called adaptation. You used to live in a tiny room and now you're in a spacious house, but after a while you adapt psychologically, so you're no happier than before. On the other hand, you can also adapt the other direction, to a smaller home, though adapting to a prison cell is not so easy.

The point of noting SBS, creeping normality and adaptation is that assessments of whether things are getting better or worse can have a recency bias. If there's a serious war getting lots of news coverage, it can seem like the danger of war is much worse than before, but if you go back 50 or 100 years, maybe today's wars don't seem so unusual.

This applies to things getting worse — or better. Relevant here is the idea of the boiling frog. If a frog is dropped into boiling water, it will jump out in alarm, but if it sits in water that's gradually heated up, it will get used to the rising temperature and eventually die. Studies show that this isn't the way frogs behave at all, but as a metaphor the boiling frog serves as a warning about climate change or any number of other conditions affecting humans and the environment. There's an obvious relation to SBS.

However, there's no name for a frog that gradually adjusts to a more pleasant temperature or a nicer pond. Perhaps this should be called the lesson of the contented frog, or the complacent frog. It is SBS in action when things are getting better and people take it for granted. Older feminists sometimes complain that younger women don't

appreciate how bad things were decades ago when women had lesser pay for the same jobs as men, were fired when they got married and were barred from many competitive sports.

I've reflected on whether things have gotten better over the past half-century or so, over the time of my own adult life. This is a useful antidote to recency bias, SBS and historical amnesia, namely not remembering the past. It's also useful to go back farther in time, to get an even longer-term perspective. However, memories aren't much good for this, so we need to turn to history. Well, I've already done this just to go back half a century, because each individual has limited awareness and we need to rely on each other's memories, and records, to make sense of the past and to compare it to the present.

More on patterns

Examining a range of issues has shown me there is much to be learned by finding and studying in-depth treatments. It's easy to coast along watching the news or reading whatever pops up on social media. Seldom does this sort of information provide a picture of long-term trends or a sense of the complexity of issues. Reading a lengthy, highly informed study of an issue seems like a luxury in today's world of hectic activities and rushed thinking, yet spending time reading, pondering and discussing in-depth studies can be more efficient in the long run. Rather than take in hundreds of itsy-bitsy reports of murders, disasters and political shenanigans, just one or two insightful studies often can be enough to provide a framework for making better sense of what's going on.

Looking at trends over half a century is one option. It can also be illuminating to see what's been changing over shorter or longer periods, a decade or a millennium. For those, like my friend Jørgen whose plaintive question opened this book, who constantly hear about bad things going on around the world, it can be useful to reflect on areas of life that are improving. For those who think we live in the best of all possible worlds, and things are bound to get better, it can be useful to be reminded of areas where the world is indeed on its way down the drain.

It is also useful to be reminded that some things are not changing all that much. Humans have the same sorts of bodies, appetites and relationships they had decades or centuries ago. We live in a world of seemingly unending and accelerating change, but in some ways this only provides new clothing for the same underlying realities. Being in a close relationship, finding a purpose in life, growing up and getting older — have these changed all that much? Well, don't ask me. You might do better to find your own answers.

Acknowledgements

For half a century, I've sought comments on drafts of my writing. This has been incredibly beneficial in terms of improving accuracy and expression, and in helping me to learn. Beyond this, it is always stimulating to engage with others, and often challenging too.

For many years, the high-output writing programme at the University of Wollongong has provided a wonderful experience in mutual learning and support. During Covid, we went online and now include members from outside Wollongong, including other countries. Members offered helpful comments on drafts of portions of text and, in several cases, entire chapters. Thanks to Tonya Agostini, Paula Arvela, Anu Bissoonauth-Bedford, Clark Chilson, Jungmin Choi, Kelly Gates, Anneleis Humphries, Anita Johnson, Tim Johnson-Newell, Olga Kuchinskaya, Julia LeMonde, Julia Nennstiel, Penny Taylor, Erin Twyford, Jody Watts and Qinqing Xu.

As described in chapter 1, I sought feedback from experts, on a wide variety of topics. Some said what I had written was fine; others offered extensive corrections and comments. Both sorts of responses were valuable. Thanks to Steven Bartlett, Tara Bartlett, Lyn Carson, Simon Chapman, Lucy Delap, Mark Diesendorf, Richard Eckersley, Hester Eisenstein, Jim Falk, Nils Petter Gleditsch, Richard Gosden, Jeff Greenberg, Debora Halbert, Richard Jackson, Jørgen Johansen, Patrice McDermott, Philip Nitschke, Robert Proctor, Melissa Raven, Fiona Stewart, Chris Tozzi, David Vaver, Carissa Véliz and Larry Wittner.

Tom Weber scrutinised the entire text with eagle eyes.

Image credits

Many of the images were created by Stable Diffusion, a free AI text-to-image program. The prompts used are listed here, along with the style. One style option is “none.”

Cover: “The planet Earth on the edge of a sewer drain,” cinematic default, edited by Jørgen Johansen with advice from Jody Watts

6, “planet earth cracking up” (cinematic default)

11, “Planet Earth on a ledge” (cinematic default)

25, “polar bears walking on sand dunes” (cinematic default)

41, “the grim reaper grinning” (cinematic default)

43, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:AGMA_Kleroterion.jpg

89, book covers

101, “Japanese girls laughing hysterically” (misc-monochrome)

131, book covers

149, “nuclear power versus wind power” (cinematic default)

162, “male and female scientists in lab coats chasing money” (none)

164, https://witness.esrc.unimelb.edu.au/145_image.html

173, “smoker” (misc-horror)

179, “brown female scientist studying tiny people” (none)

194, “George Orwell holding smartphone” (none)

207, “Ronald Reagan with automatic weapon” (cinematic default)

209, https://www.flickr.com/photos/tom-margie/4050083521, CC BY-SA 2.0 DEED

225, “civilians sheltering from bombs dropped” (none)

244, “female microelectronics workers grinning” (none)

Index