# A Civilized Society
## Preparing the World-System for Redesign

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## Abstract

*Our shared worldview tolerates entangled factors that manifest in a pathological condition - a world-system. Certain factors constrain reflection that could lead to healthier alternatives. Depending on our perspective they cause us to perceive our reality as inevitable, or as a set of problems requiring solutions. But eliminating war, or adapting to climate change, for example, are complex issues. Linear problem-solving is ineffective. Yet most change efforts, even those at scale, avoid systemic reinvention because of a lack of radical empathy and difficulties involved in collaboration. If the human family is to endure in the face of imminent threats to our civilization, that must change. A conscious metamorphosis of the prevailing worldview is urgently needed. In spite of statistics proving that conflict, crime, poverty, starvation and disease are all in decline, the continued global application of certain factors (devised by emperors, monarchs, warriors and prelates to preserve power in an age long past) resonate adversely today. They are destined to generate even greater pain, delivering unimagineable consequences, if we cannot come together to create better futures. Yet this is a societal challenge we have wilfully ignored for the past few thousand years. This paper identifies those critical factors and proposes ways to break through the current impasse.*

There is a widespread belief that the terms *worldview* and *mindset* are interchangeable. I cannot agree and contend there are profound differences and furthermore, that these differences matter.

The former manifests as an explicit philosophy, shared view, or conception of the world (a unified *society of mind*) while the latter aligns the values and attitudes we acquire as infants and subsequently apply to interpret, engage with, and contribute to society in a coherent manner.

Whereas our worldview is a shared, albeit largely subliminal phenomenon — obdurate and unchanging, a paradigm we tacitly accept without challenge, —cultural mindsets are diverse, numerous, and evolve over time. This evolution occurs by way of subtle (sometimes mysterious) modifications to customs, myths

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and rituals that create myriad rich distinctions between groups and communities. Some of these are reified while others, often for no apparent reason, fade in significance or simply vanish altogether.

Since very recent breakthroughs in genomics have confirmed the idea that ethnicity (in its biological sense) does not exist, — that it is an illusion — differences in social context, together with the processes of inheriting and disseminating norms and customs, have provided crucial insights for appreciating alternate facets that connect and distinguish (rather than divide) human beings.

Arising from a unique combination of cultural and social conditioning as well as collective responses to shifting contextual and environmental circumstances, cultural mindsets are the idiosyncratic "lenses" through which we sense, make sense, and process meaning, expressions of which are then enacted locally. These expressions of meaning (or behaviours) are autonomically shaped to fit within the prevalent ethos of the worldview.

Deeper attitudinal expressions of this ethos (behaviours congruent with our most life-affirming beliefs) become ingrained moral tenets — for the most part, universally accepted. To step outside the bounds of these laws is to invite immediate hostility and separation, an existential position we learn to avoid, for such individuals are promptly labelled outliers, heretics, psychopaths, felons and delinquents. All are dealt with as misfits.

This presents us with a bittersweet paradox. Science and spirituality both hold that a viable living system can only be designed by an intelligence external to that system. Anything else is mere process. Logically, then, effecting radical change to the current worldview can only come about by recreating the system from the outside-in. I am not suggesting for one moment that we hand over responsibility for the future of humanity to criminals and delinquents. Far from it. But public branding of the types mentioned above could be construed as a clever device for helping safeguard the status quo – on the condition it had been deliberately contrived by an elite cadre with that sole purpose in mind. After all, it conveniently devalues any possibility of "what might be" by admonishing and quarantining those who would change "what is" (in this case the world-system) without which the worldview would lose its legitimacy. Such conspiratorial intentions might even be deemed acceptable by a majority of people if the worldview were benign, equitable and just. But it would be intolerable if the worldview happened to be toxic or malevolent in any way. I will return to this argument later.

So, while these terms *worldview* and *mindset* are both meaningfully distinct yet inextricably related, they are not identical. Nor is this just a pedantic view but a necessary discernment within the context of conscious evolution, for it helps signify a grand societal challenge humanity has conveniently ignored for the past few thousand years.

## 1. Value in Cultural Diversity

In spite of our nomadic existence and the trend towards mixed relationships, cultural mindsets can still be observed in their purest form within bounded territories such as a township, island or remote expanse of land. The indigenous Ubuntu of South Africa, the Inuit of the Arctic and the Koori peoples of Australia are examples of this. But because of progressive

urbanisation over the past century, heightened more recently by the surge in social media and mobile telephony, many unique traditions and more of these formerly discrete communities are blurring into an homogenous milieu.

Akin to the loss of biodiversity in the natural environment over the past century or more, the contraction of the world's disparate cultures and their corresponding cultural mindsets into a uniform monoculture is accelerating. The human family, once a richly variegated tapestry of cultures, languages and tribes, has been subjugated by a range of factors. Not least among these has been the emergence of an irresistible hybrid. Global in scale. Enabled by rapid leaps in artificial intelligence, information and communications technologies. Driven, from all points of the compass, by a psychosomatic desire for greater novelty that is fuelling a manufacturing frenzy from companies scrambling over one another to fulfil that need, this contemporary collective impulse, glibly labelled globalisation by some, which now engulfs us all.

This contemporary condition derives its uncompromising potency from the conjunction of the world's three most widespread cultural mindsets – namely Occidental, Indic and Sinic readings of the worldview. But now they are incited by a single myopic teleology: ownership and the acquisition of material wealth. At one level, this represents a convergence of the prevailing worldview and mindset hybrid, to the extent that it is almost impossible to distinguish between them and even more difficult to uncouple. Fused in a single overriding purpose they have become all but inseparable: a globalised presence representing an unprecedented accord between the two phenomena. At a lower logical level, a similar problem can be recognised in the growing tendency to equate *democracy* with *capitalism.*

In both cases, it is not in the least bit melodramatic to represent the contemporary condition as the triumph of materialism over belief. To some extent, I see this as a pathological state — one whose consequences should concern us all. The demise of cultural diversity has already had a profound impact on our habits, practices, relationships and future well-being. It has led to an unhealthy obsession with growth, monetary gain and affluence. It has positioned us as separate from (and superior to) other species and the environment upon which we rely for our health and survival. It stirs greed, envy and resentment, at the same time as it devalues compassion, generosity and appreciation.

It is also rapidly diminishing our legacy of inheritable knowledge — most evident in the loss of bio cultural diversity — such as local social structures, languages and dialects. Indeed, we appear to be on the brink of a mass extinction of languages. Global languages such as Mandarin Chinese, English and Spanish are now in the ascendancy. In situations where lesser languages are labelled primitive, overtly suppressed through government regulation or tacitly subdued, through an association with shame or suffering, and where there are obvious economic benefits from speaking a more international language, there is a strong possibility that the languages people use in their daily lives for expressing their unique identity will simply vanish without trace.

This loss of bio cultural diversity is significant from a variety of perspectives. But in the meta-context of disentangling our worldview from the various cultural mindsets we have traditionally used to interpret that worldview from which the *world-system* is constructed,

it is absolutely critical. Indeed, if we are unable to prevent a further assimilation of cultural mindsets into an homogenous, self-reinforcing, *world-mind* of unchallenged supremacy, it is highly probable that humanity will have sealed its fate. The pragmatic *nomos* of managing the economy will have totally appropriated the sacred logos of human purpose.

## 2. Worldview — Role and Ethos

Distinctions, even finely-grained, between worldview and cultural mindset are important if we are to comprehend which factors cause our world-system to be like the way it is and where in the final analysis we must look if we want to re-design or improve it. Why should world-system change be so vital? Why cannot we simply all speak the same language, stop worrying about the Earth's climate and warring states, and simply enjoy the material wealth we deserve and have so conscientiously created?

I believe there is a compelling answer to that question. But for any answer to make sense, we need to revisit the constitution and temperament of the prevailing worldview — its underlying *ethos*. We must get a sense of whether this ethos serves humanity's purpose, or whether only a very small minority of the population gain from its longevity. Are its values still relevant? Is its impact toxic or benign? Destructive or creative? Are our collective interests best served by its most profound assumptions, or have these beliefs outlived their relevance in an era of such extraordinary volatility and interconnectedness?

Over the course of human history, the past thousand years have been the most startling in terms of "change". During this relatively short period, we can trace our journey from nomadic tribes to settled villages, to the larger townships created by the industrial revolution to the vast urban conurbations of today. At the same time, we can point to an acceleration in the pace of instrumental change — from the agrarian revolution, through the industrial revolution to the present day where, from a technological perspective at least, the speed of innovation has become exponential. Actually, an identical trend, matching the pace of the times, is evident in music. For example, if one compares the calm, almost motionless nature of medieval polyphony with today's multi-layered sophistication, the increase in harmonic and rhythmic complexity is very apparent, coincidentally mirroring, at every stage, changes that are taking place elsewhere in society.

In spite of such accelerating change in so many factors of our lives, we tend to focus and remain absorbed primarily by five topics: politics, power, personalities, production and purchases. I include governance in the second category, and money and the acquisition of wealth in the latter two. These five themes and their interaction form the cinematic backdrop to our lives, which then inform the topics and ventures to which we attach most significance. Together, they have become the *leitmotif* promulgated in the narratives we weave for each other — appearing as headlines in popular media and as captions in our personal messaging. The world and consequently our world-system are awash with this *leitmotif* which appears in myriad different guises. It is incessant, undeviating and, one supposes, unintended. Or, at least, not deliberately designed by any single group to function as it does. Naturally, if there existed a global PR firm led by Edward Louis Bernays, working for an enterprise like the UN, I might be more suspicious...

Intentions are essential to ponder in this context, of course, especially as the collective behaviours of seven billion people now inadvertently reify the prevailing worldview which, overwhelmingly, is one of individualistic narcissism and rampant consumerism. Nothing wrong with that — might be your response. Possibly not. But if we take a long hard look at the nature of this "conception of reality" which drives the motif of industrial economism in order to examine our intentions in that light, we might well arrive at a somewhat different conclusion.

For this single, audacious idea has remained untouched by the commotion of humanity's advancement across the ages. It has persisted essentially intact, pure and immune from change — in every community, in every region, and in every era. We have even given this idea, this worldview, a name. We call it civilization. Civilization is something we all espouse. We all lay claim to being civilized. Everything that is not civilized we call uncultured, inferior or primitive. Those who (we assume) aspire to become civilized we judge to be illiterate, pre-literate, or we use some equally disparaging term signifying a lack of social or technological maturity. By that simple designation we ensure a majority of people regard its visible manifestation, the world-system, as the pinnacle of human progress. But what is this idea? What is this *worldview*? How can we actually "see" it in order to describe its essence with any degree of accuracy?

Naturally enough, the shift in perspective needed — the step into a new epistemology — cannot be achieved from within the chaotic hurly-burly and familiarity of everyday life in the valley. Climbing to base camp is not much help. The summit, too, can be shrouded with swirling mists. Even here in this relative silence, there is too much to confuse and confound. And so the next step takes us into the void. We learn to "see" differently from this higher altitude. From here we sense the most expansive cosmology of humankind — one encompassing the most impenetrable pathways into the human psyche and the unfathomable tracts inhabited by the soul. From there, but from there only, it is just possible we will be able to discern and appreciate the landscape of the *worldview* with greater clarity.

Far beyond political ideology and philosophy, transcending history, and reaching more deeply into the collective conscious than any branch of psychology can possibly map, some surprising distinguishing features become apparent in the expanded "now" of this epiphany.

## 2.1. Power and Authority

Conspicuously, we now comprehend that the inherent power to change whole systems is vested in guardians of the status quo. In reality, such power is wielded by very few people and their institutions at any one time. Most of the population remains an underclass of consenting serfs who work at the behest of these guardians, comprising eminent individuals elected to positions of authority, others who are self-appointed or who grab power for themselves, plus a few who acquire clout by virtue of their personal fortune or friendships. This group, let us call them the *leaders* in preference to more emotionally-charged terms like *elite* or *establishment*, protect their status and authority by various means (including the formal apparatus of the state, the military, and rules governing society) often in open opposition to one another.

Perhaps such opposition is a good thing. If those with power consciously decided to cooperate in order to maintain the status quo within the current world-system, the options and op-

portunities for radical change would diminish considerably. Outside of conspiracy theories, many verging on irrational hysteria, we can probably discount such schemas as mere fantasy.

## 2.2. Aggression and Hostility

One element that is impossible to discount is the way hostility and conflict are used by the *leaders* — both to cling onto and bolster their (personal or institutional) power, in addition to controlling all aspects of production and distribution. Indeed, from the warriors of the Zhou Dynasty in ancient China, through the medieval Crusades right up to the pre-emptive strike strategy so enthusiastically embraced by the US empire, the industrial war machine has been used as a key economic factor to boost public morale and manipulate patriotic feelings, as well as stimulate consumption.

## 2.3. Communications and Compliance

Words ignite change and can shape the course of destiny. So, it is no surprise that language is used by *leaders* to transform our emotions via carefully crafted messages. Most aspects of messaging in society are orchestrated — whether it be gossip, news, corporate marketing, public relations spin or government propaganda. Generally speaking, these messages are aimed at stimulating a specific commercial need or creating a sense of well-being that ultimately lead to civic compliance. Breaking or challenging the hereditary contract existing between *leaders* and society (particularly the presumed obligation of acting in the best interests of the community) can spark uproar. This is why public activism and campaigning organisations like Wikileaks and Avaaz, for example, have caused such vituperative reactions from the established patrons of the status quo. It is not that the law has been contravened that hurts them. It is the fact that social conventions implying trust have been shattered and found to be a sham. When cornered in this manner, a prey strikes back with all its cunning and venom.

## 2.4. Central Narratives

Again, the pivotal stories constructed or sustained by the *leaders* invariably choreograph public opinion and feelings in ways that are either aimed at stifling complaint or nurturing consent vis-à-vis the way things are. Paradoxically, these stories have also inspired some of the most beautiful works of art over the centuries. In this regard, it is fascinating to search through literature to find the three foremost categories of myth that have held sway across the ages.

Chief among these stories are the God-myths — explicit stories of a higher creative intelligence to which we must all eventually submit. Used by kings, witch doctors, shamans, law-makers and prelates alike, as well as by some of the world's most enduring institutions, these stories might just be a distraction. But they are a clever one — appealing to our innermost yearnings, the desire for renewal and hope, and the craving for hierarchy of some kind, mostly so that we can delegate responsibility, it must be said.

Likewise, rational and scientific narratives elevating human beings to one of pre-eminence over other species neatly fit lessons in the scriptures of all the world's great religions,

urging us to subdue nature and exploit it for our own use. We needed no second bidding on that count. I suspect we've even exceeded the Almighty's aspirations there!

The third category promotes notions of societal advancement and progress through economic means. These stories choose to ignore purpose and vision in order to endorse continued economic growth and development within the context of increasing competition for scarce resources. These stories invariably provide compelling arguments for constantly needing to boost production and grow GDP, as if this were the pinnacle of human achievement. The logic is clear. If more and more stuff is manufactured, the likely result will be complacency rather than complaints. As Noam Chomsky so eloquently put it, this is the manufacturing of consent.

## 3. Conclusions

It would be understandable, yet far too simplistic, to construe what I have claimed here about the differences between *worldview* and *cultural mindset* as coming from a deeply-ingrained, extreme, socialist point of view. As far as my self-awareness is able to stretch, it does not. I have tried to be as "objective" as any individual can possibly be.

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My observations of our current worldview derive their relevance and legitimacy from the fact that we find identical features cropping up everywhere. They were as common in medieval Europe as in Maoist China. They occurred in Mussolini's fascism as well as Lula da Silva's workers' party in Brazil. They are felt in the turmoil of revolutions and in extended periods of peace. They occur in the most prosperous nations like the US and Japan and in the most poverty-stricken like Somalia and Afghanistan. They are as universal as anything can be.

Likewise, the connotations I put on my analysis are above the politics of the past and an attempt to envisage a future where all people share in the joy of what it means to be alive and human. So, if anything, my position is not ideological but humanitarian — deeply engaged with the potential for humanity to evolve differently and prosperously by accessing an entirely different set of moral intentions and design criteria.

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My conclusion is as inevitable as this latter premise. Progress will not come from sitting idly by watching our diverse cultural mindsets, with their vast repository of knowledge, customs and languages stretching back into antiquity,

decline in importance and utility. It will not come from tweaking the current paradigm in a futile effort to placate public critique, protect current positions, and delay changes that are probably inevitable. And it will certainly not come from pretending that everything is fine — that we will soon end the melodrama and return to some semblance of normality. No. Radical change is required. It is now an emergency we must tackle. But how difficult could the conscious redesign of our civilizational worldview really be?

Whether it is climate change, water conservation, increasing the capacity of the planet to produce nutritious food, ending war or eliminating poverty, the technologies and financial capital we have at our disposal today are sufficient for our needs. The means of production are already shifting in a new industrial revolution where distributed systems, additive manufactures, online intelligence and open source enterprise will be able to cater to the common good.

The capacity we have for creativity and innovation is already unparalleled. Our capability to learn and adapt is remarkable. Human ingenuity and willpower, especially when under pressure are astonishing. But we are dragging our feet when it comes to harnessing any of these capabilities to improve the world-system for greater good. Instead, we resort to myopic stupidity in projects that are constantly constrained by the gravitational pull of a worldview that is dangerously obsolete. If we wait too much longer for evidence, this worldview is unworkable; we will probably be responsible for consigning future generations to a life of unwarranted misery. I do not want that. My children certainly do not want that. I am sure everyone reading this piece does not want that. So what must we do?

Fundamentally, it is a matter of design. Especially the design of revised intentions and a vision for what the human project on this planet could become if we were to restore the dynamic idea of a single human family. That will require us to be uncompromising in addressing the four features I previously identified:

i.   Power and authority will need to migrate from the current group of individuals — the *leaders* (with their particularized institutions and highly protective strategies for success) to the community — a global commons enabled by new technologies where knowledge is exchanged and shared openly in new and enlightened forms of governance and human enterprise. This immense task will need to be undertaken sensitively and in ways that "include and transcend" the very best our species has created and loved. It will need to discard those things (tangible and intangible) that no longer make sense. It will need to navigate the bewildered and hostile reactions we can expect from those with vested interests in preserving the status quo. And it will need to avoid the potential for creating different forms of corrupt practice we witness ingrained within the present world-system.

ii.  War is unnecessary. I do not mean to demean the sacrifice made by men and women who go to war in the genuine belief they are fighting for freedom, or democracy, or human rights, or whatever argument their leaders have made to convince them of the need for conflict. But if we all aspire for a common goal, collaborate to distribute the wealth from production more equitably, and global issues confronting us are adequately resolved, the reasons for fighting fade. Indeed, putting an end to all conflict would be the most appropriate memorial for such human sacrifice. Historically, conflict has been a subterfuge,

a device deliberately manufactured and deployed by *the leaders* because of an impulse to protect the status quo, maintain artificial distinctions, or seize hold of resources. In almost every other instance it is promoted as the final straw in situations where all other options have been tried yet found wanting. In reality, this final reason is purely a failure of imagination coupled with an unwillingness to engage for mutual benefit.

iii. Communications need to become open and globally transparent. Attempts by current *leaders* to limit public freedoms, such as controlling the Internet, for example, must be met with a courageous and firm resolve to ensure they do not triumph. Messages traversing the public domain will need to convey the truth rather than hide in various shades of grey. For example, I find it absolutely abhorrent that the tobacco industry is able to fund research proving smoking cigarettes is not a health hazard when so many millions die each year from inhaling tobacco smoke. The same indictment can be alleged at the fossil fuel industry. The game is up. We will no longer be duped.

iv. Finally, the key narratives in society will need to be redrafted. These, after all, are the myths that persuade and influence. Outmoded themes of apathy, competition and scarcity must quickly be replaced by themes emphasising empathy, cooperation and abundance. The new constitution for Iceland is an objective lesson in how this might be accomplished. It was drafted from thousands of contributions invited from citizens online. Although Iceland is a bounded jurisdiction, there is absolutely no reason we cannot apply the same principles to creating and expressing a global vision for the human family — a new ethos for a worldview starved of fear, superstition and individual heroes.

Our collective future is bound up with being able to make substantial, long-lasting changes to the constraints we have already identified in the prevailing world-system — including manifestations of inequity and injustice in addition to toxic and wasteful practices. If we can change the assumptions and intentions underlying the prevailing worldview, bringing a wealth of diverse knowledge, wisdom and cultural diversity to bear on dealing with the issues facing us, we will not simply survive but set the scene for a new golden age.

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