

Technological Progress and Humanity: Essay 4, The Decline of Western Civilization

Declining lifespans, money as patriotism and humanity's future

By Bruce Cuthbertson

I'm not an economist, but a humanist. I believe in capitalism and the power of innovation. I believe we have a responsibility to steer our economic systems and our culture in a moral direction, that not only provides for the class of innovators, but for the least advantaged among us, that provides a minimum threshold of humanity and just existence for all of us.

I also believe that we, as a people, need to catch up to technology. Technology has outpaced our progress, our ability to adapt to it, emotionally, spiritually, psychologically, intellectually. We lack perspective and wisdom. We have almost no understanding of its impact or how its impact might affect the future of life even 30 years from now, much less 100 or 1000 years. We're so focused on business and making money that we've forgotten how to see.

Unemployment is at the lowest level in half a century and yet, there are more homeless and more struggling people on our streets and in our barely middleclass neighborhoods than we've seen before.

From a purely theoretical perspective of a supply and demand curve, we'd expect wages to rise as a counterweight to low unemployment, resulting in a stronger middle class. But that evades us, classroom economics doesn't mirror reality.

Instead, civilization is split in half, with the promise of progress and intrigue of what technology will do for man on one side. And on the other side, against this, we have real people struggling to exist. And perhaps on both sides, we have this pursuit of the external over finding meaning in our own lives.

Loneliness is Killing Us

We don't have to look at the hundreds of studies on rising anxiety, stress and loneliness to know that society and possibly civilization itself is declining, even as progress propels us into the future. We're already acutely aware.

The damage of the economic divide created by isolationist capitalism isn't just economic. It's physiological, it's psychological and it's spiritual.

People are stressed about not having enough food to eat and where they're going to live. The wealth divide is becoming extreme. Loneliness, personal debt, housing instability, and anxiety about the future are at epidemic levels.

Wealth accumulation is only happening at the very top. The bottom 50% of U.S. households have 32% less wealth than they had in 2003 while the top 1% has more than twice as much wealth than they had in 2003, according to a [wealth study in the Wall St. Journal](#).

Housing prices have increased 41% since 2009 while income has only grown 8% since then, according the same WSJ article.

In the Bay Area, ground zero for innovation, [more and more people are living in cars](#). Even people who have high-tech jobs can't afford housing. [Some, including people who work at Google, are living in RVs on the street](#). This is the reality of Silicon Valley's techno-utopian society. People are destitute and having to make hard choices, such as having a place to live or having food to eat. People feel hopeless about the future.

The overall effect: We're being crushed spiritually. We've lost our way.

Anxiety is at epidemic levels. According to an [American Psychiatry Association study](#) in 2018, almost 70% of Americans are somewhat or extremely anxious about their health (68%), about their ability to pay their bills and living expenses (67%), about the safety of themselves and their families (68%). Further, nearly 40% said they were more anxious in the past year (2017-18) than in the previous year (2016-17).

In a [2018 American Psychological Association study](#), more than half of Gen Z (54%) have reported feeling anxious at least once in the past month. In the American College Health Association's annual survey last year, more than 85% of college students said they felt "overwhelmed" and 51% said they felt at some point over the previous year that "things were helpless." As student debt skyrockets and as jobs and industries that require human judgment disappear, the value of a college degree is declining. That is, unless you're lucky enough to go to one of the elite colleges that give you a better chance at gaining admittance to America's Emerald City and its wealth. We've created a world that offers little promise of a secure future to young people.

Boomers and the Greatest Generation are [increasingly dying poor and alone](#). According to [research by the Wall St. Journal](#), more than 40% of people aged 55-70 are entering old age without the means to maintain their standard of living. Many are burdened by high debt. Their [pensions are either non-existent or declining](#) and their dismal 401k plans will provide a median income of just \$8000 a year.

Our Lives are Getting Shorter

For the first time in over 100 years, American lifespans are declining. The most recent statistics from the [Centers for Disease Control \(CDC\)](#) show that life expectancy has decreased in the

United States twice in the last three years, something which hasn't happened since 1915-1918, during a period marked by WWI and the Spanish influenza epidemic. Life expectancy is a measure of a country's overall wellbeing.

Many factors are contributing to the loss in quality of life among Americans, but isolationist capitalism is one of them, if not the primary driver.

Gordon Gecko: "Greed is Good." Home Depot Founders: "Making Money is Patriotic"

At the other end of the spectrum, recently, two of the founders of Home Depot Bernie Marcus and John Catsimatidis made a compelling and impassioned argument in the Wall St. Journal about the benefits of a free market society, [Making Money is a Patriotic Act](#). In essence, it was Reagan's argument that American freedom and the American Dream are tied to the ideal that we should be able to amass wealth unapologetically, that the ultrarich in Reagan's trickle-down economics have always provided jobs and created industries.

Further, without that so-called freedom to pursue and achieve such wealth, innovation wouldn't happen and our economy would stagnate. There'd be no incentive for innovators. It pits the economy's health against anything that might put a check on a business owner's pursuit of profit and wealth (e.g. government, education, healthcare, safety net services, mental health services, pension and retirement plans and other common goods that everyone should enjoy equally).

This argument closes the loop in tying the value of freedom entirely to monetary wealth.

Bernie and John live in the world of the innovation lottery, where there are a very few big winners (those lucky innovators who realize unfathomable success, people like Mark Zuckerberg, Jack Dorsey, and even John and Bernie) and masses of losers (everyone else, especially the class of people who don't own property or businesses).

The innovation lottery is just that, a lottery. Innovation is an evolutionary-like system. It has nothing to do with American values of hard work and grit or the discovery of new frontiers or more importantly, of a united and egalitarian value system. They won the lottery and argue that because of that, they were able to provide hundreds of thousands of jobs.

Are We Headed into a Neo-Feudal Society?

The sentiment and tone in Bernie and John's op-ed article feels not unlike that of a feudal lord, asking the masses to trust in their generosity and wisdom in where to invest their wealth for society's benefit, that they know better than our democracy (than everyone else) and better than our government how to make the world better for all of us. We're asked to trust them to lead us to a promised land after they've endorsed a philosophy that's torn America apart over the past 40 years. Bernie and John sit safely behind the walls of the mythic Emerald City, telling us they know which levers to pull to benefit all of us on the outside.

While I admire Bernie and John's passion (and certainly they've been generous with their philanthropic efforts, but they seem blind to their role in creating our dysfunctional society. The

declining and broken schools, the government stagnation, the poverty and broken families and drug use, which they critique as the “problem” are all part of their doing, all a result of isolationist and winner-take-all capitalism. These are the consequences of putting a Libertarian chokehold on services such as education, healthcare, and other common goods, all in the name of trying to achieve an unchecked free market and undermining the positive role of government.

Is There a Future Beyond Silicon Valley’s Utopia?

Fortunately, there are entrepreneurs such as Bill Gates or Ray Dalio or Marc Benioff who recognize that if the middle class fails, so does capitalism. They understand that the system (specifically, Reagan’s experiment in extreme laissez-faire capitalism) has led to mass inequality. They still believe in capitalism, just as I do, but they realize that it needs to change in order to survive and to serve society and civilization better, even if they don’t necessarily agree on what changes are needed. But it’s a start.

Whatever the solution, we need to discover and practice a more egalitarian form of capitalism, one in which the middle class thrives and where hard-working families can attain long-term stability, where we’re not turning ourselves inside out to keep up, where we fear losing so much that we’ll even cheat to put our children in the best schools.

If we take the current path of technological progress and “individualistic” capitalism to its theoretical conclusion, it’s likely a world devoid of any middle class.

And it would be the end of sustainable capitalism. Without a middle class to buy products and services, there’s no capitalism at all.

I struggle with this dilemma. I believe in hope and I believe in the creative imagination that can lead to the benefits that innovation and capitalism can bring if they operate within a morally grounded and united culture and society.

Humanity’s Future

Can we discover or create a capitalism that’s driven from stronger democratic values based on fairness and equality and justice, where there aren’t only a few lottery winners, where the benefits of innovation are realized broadly, where our humanity can prevail.

Some “tech” humanists, such as [Kate O’Neill](#) and even my friend [Peter Temes](#), author of *We the People: Human Purpose in a Digital Age, a guide to digital ethics for people, organizations and robots of all kinds*, argue that we need to program our humanity into technology. They’re probably right.

But trying to program our humanity into technology is not enough. We need to approach our future holistically, not merely through technology. Regardless, the world needs more humanists like Kate O’Neill, Peter Temes and futurist [Gerd Leonherd](#), author of *Technology vs. Humanity*, who challenges the singularity of Silicon Valley in favor of a more balanced, humanist approach.

The human challenge: Innovation and capitalism are evolutionary systems. We can't control the direction they take by trying to work purely from the inside out.

We need to look at the issues holistically.

We Start by Uniting Around Common Values

The future will come down to whether we continue to practice capitalism in a way that divides us or whether we will gain the wisdom to look at the world holistically.

CEOs are finally starting to see the risk in the divide between the haves and the have nots. The Business Roundtable, representing many of America's largest companies, recently rewrote their [Statement of Purpose](#). It begins: "Americans deserve an economy that allows each person to succeed through hard work and creativity and to lead a life of meaning and dignity."

The statement goes on to support their long-held belief in free-market capitalism, but it recognizes that our economy as a whole is dependent upon many stakeholders, not just shareholders. It speaks to investing in employees and being ethical with suppliers and supporting our communities and protecting the environment.

The 181 CEO members who supported the statement understand that the long-term prosperity of the economy and their firms depends on the overall health of society. The 7 CEO members who opposed the statement are still beholden to Milton Friedman's misguided philosophy that their only obligation is to maximize shareholder value and that minimalist government produces the best outcomes.

Those 181 CEOs recognize that their companies will do better when all of society is healthy. They understand that the long-term sustainability of their firms depends on making a course correction, and that we're all in this together.

This is a step in the right direction and hopefully, it'll help start pulling our country and our society back together.

The Return of a Just Society and Sustainable Capitalism

The best and most successful companies in the next 100 years will recognize we're at a crossroads. The innovators and leaders who build and run those companies will believe in the benefits of an egalitarian capital system.

They'll understand humanity's needs. They'll have high levels of empathy and an intuitive sense for holistic solutions, not merely shareholder-driven ones. They'll recognize the dangers of Silicon Valley's utopian beliefs and of an economic lottery system where only a lucky few come out as winners. As Betty Sue Flowers said in *Presence*, "becoming a real human being is the primary leadership issue of our time."

They'll recognize that we're all better off when we're united around common values that build a strong middle class that can participate within the capitalist system, when we understand that our ecosystem operates as a whole, that we need to protect the environment and take care of our communities and invest in our employees.

And they'll create industries that support the sustainability of long-term economic prosperity. They'll believe in the wellbeing of our society, that's defined by more than innovation or profits or shareholder value.

Perhaps most importantly, they'll look at their legacy in terms of how they've been able to benefit humanity.

If it's our fate to invent the future, then we might try to build it in the form of our humanity, that reflects the best of who we are as a people. Let's hope we don't forget what it means to be human.

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