Rethinking Progress and Mulling
The Advent of an Epoch of Humanistic Civilization

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Abstract

 "Modern Progress" has been very much a thoughtless campaign by humans to dominate over others weaker than themselves and to extract from mother nature with little regard for sustainability.   Yet the world is never short of wise counsel. Great minds from both the West and the East have taught us how to live well harmoniously among ourselves and with mother nature. Such wise counsel has been routinely disregarded because of the huge and outsized profits from such "progress" to those with leverage who naturally seek to protect their interests. The advent of adversarial processes in the West in the last 500 years further entrenched human selfishness. We show that the adversarial culture is not intrinsic to Western civilization. To bring sustainable peace and prosperity to the world, we need to go back to more ancient roots and revive a culture that emphasizes the common interests of all humans.

1. **Introduction:**

The Sociological Review Monograph published in June 2022 is a collection of articles that are all critical of the idea of "modern progress", which, with its "ruinous philosophical, political and ecological histories," has left the world less fair, less livable, more polarized, and clearly unsustainable. Savransky and Lundy, the editors, look forward to a better world after "upending the historicist, colonial, developmental, and extractivist logics of progress." (p.221)

Savransky and Lundy(2022) cited Escobar (1995); Ferguson (1994); Gudynas, (2021) as "well-articulated denunciations of progress's Eurocentric colonialism, impoverished historicism, rationalistic hubris and ecocidal extractivism." While much of the practices that the authors decry are indeed Eurocentric, it should be noted that Western culture is not always exploitative and extractivist. Indeed, Europe and the West have never been short of great thinkers and humanistic practitioners. Albert Schweitzer was from Europe, and he was outspoken against colonialism and spent years serving Africans. Immanuel Kant was from Europe, and his call for people to follow the call of duty and to treat humans with respect and dignity is antithetical to exploitative colonialism. John Rawls, a contemporary American, sees justice as fairness. To be fair, he argues, we need to put down our identities "under a veil of ignorance" and put ourselves in the shoes of others. More than two thousand years ago, the Stoics in ancient Greece held wisdom, justice, courage, and moderation dearly, and what they preach closely mirror Confucian teachings. More importantly, the Christianity which is the predominant faith in the West, preaches loving kindness and truthfulness. The spirit of Christianity resonates well with Chinese culture, and the famous Emperor Taizong of the Tang Dynasty received Nestorian bishop Alopen in the royal court in Chang An (today's Xian) and invited him to the palace library to translate the scriptures.[1]

Unfortunately, political leaders in the West in the last five centuries rarely take the teachings of Jesus seriously; nor would they take the likes of Immanuel Kant and John Rawls seriously. Given the adversarial political system, the likes of Kant and Rawls never had a chance.

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[1] https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2022/november-web-only/china-nestorian-church-stele-mission.html

In his widely cited 1993 *Foreign Affairs* article, Huntington (1992) warned that "the conflicts of the future will occur along the cultural fault lines separating civilizations." He proclaimed that such differences as "views on the relations between God and man, the individual and the group, the citizen and the state, parents and children, husband and wife, as well as differing views of the relative importance of rights and responsibility, liberty and authority, equality and hierarchy," being "the products of centuries," can hardly be reconciled. (p.25)

Still, the case that humanity is universal across "civilizations" is compelling. This means we all have similar propensities and fears. Driven by these propensities and fears, humans in different parts of the world develop different religions and cultural practices, fight against the fury of nature and fight each other, and exploit the bounty of mother earth when they can, often ignoring the consequences. Through history, philosophers in both the West and in the East would remind us of the need to live in harmony with each other and with mother nature. Not until we take heed of their advice, however, can we call ourselves "civilized."

Today many westerners live in Asia; and many Asians live in the West. Inter-racial marriages are common. If we go back to our ancient philosophical roots, Confucian teachings are not really that much different from those of Stoics or Christians. Even in recent centuries till now, many teachings from the West resonate with teachings from the East. In particular, the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, many tenets of existentialism, Carl Jung's discussion of individuation, can all find their counterparts in China. Notwithstanding a popular belief that Eastern cultures are collectivistic while Western cultures are individualistic, the concept of personal development to the Chinese is all about introspection which by definition is entirely personal and authentic, and in a fundamental sense individualist. Th Confucian adage: "Do not do unto others what you would not have others do unto you" is no different from the teachings of Jesus who teach that we should love our neighbors as ourselves.[2]

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[2] Some commentators make the point that treating others the way one likes to be treated may be poor advice because people may have different preferences. This point is well taken, but if "the way one likes to be treated" is understood not in specific terms but in more general terms such as "being treated with respect" for example, the Christian Golden Rule still stands.

From this perspective, Huntington's "clash of civilizations" is puzzling. We argue that the "clash of civilization" in recent history owes its origin to recent institutions in the West and is not grounded in fundamental value differences. Because institutions shape the way we think and even our instincts, we do see apparent differences in dominant culture in the East and in the West. But to portray these differences as leading to fundamental clashes in civilizations will not help the cause of reviving a "humanistic civilization" which ancient sages in both the East and the West cherish.

Section 2 in this paper will outline the historical origins of adversarial institutions in western or westernized societies which appear to go against the unitary social and political systems that are more common in the east. **Section 3** will describe the dynamics of the adversarial institutions that have reshaped Western societies and produced an ideology-driven civilization that is now producing rifts in the social and political fabric. **Section 4** raises the fundamental question of what institutions serve the needs of people better in terms of the universal values that we all cherish and asks whether a world "beyond adversary democracy" characterized by "humanist civilization" without distinction to East and West is possible. **Section 5** proposes a new socio-political regime that is grounded on the Rawlsian principle of fairness, starting from a rapprochement among the world's great religions and political ideologies. **Section 6**, in the concluding section, we highlight the importance of overcoming our common propensity to mistake means for ends. Only when we all set our eyes on our universal values, can we start to rebuild a world that is truly civilized with an open mind.

2. **Historical Origins of Adversarial Institutions**

John W. Burton, in the inaugural issue of the *International Journal of Peace Studies* in 1996, noted that "Systems failure has been a feature of human history. Revolutions have led to alternatives which have in time run into their own problems. And now, with continuing failures to deal with societies' problems, there is, even in advanced 'democracies', a growing reaction against the Westminster adversarial party-political system and its no less adversarial American version." This, importantly, is not just an American problem. Zakaria wrote in his 1997 *Foreign Affairs* article on illiberal democracy: "Governments produced by elections may be inefficient, corrupt, shortsighted, irresponsible, dominated by special interests, and incapable of adopting

policies demanded by the public good." Clearly, electoral democracy does not automatically prevent power abuse.   It only offers a pathway to power, and interest groups are naturally drawn to this pathway.

Mansbridge (1983), in her *Beyond Adversary Democracy*, attributed the emergence of adversarial politics to the emergence of capitalism. She was aware of the natural propensity of capitalists as well as workers to vie for power. She wrote, "Nascent capitalism required the loosening of personal ties and the legitimation of self-interest…The new economic order required a new political ethos, for which Thomas Hobbes obligingly provided a rationale." (Mansbridge, p.15)   The propensity to seek power to further one's interests, however, is found in the East as in the West. Mansbridge pointed out: "For Rousseau, an adversary democracy with its base in conflicting interest was an abomination." "He traced three stages by which society moved from a unitary to an adversary democracy."(p.18)   Thus even in the West, unitary democracy that stressed consensus has a longer history than adversary democracy.

Kishlansky (1977) traced the origin of adversarial politics to the American Civil War.   He wrote: "In an organic political structure there was hardly much place for [the term political party], and [the word "party"] continued to express groupings in a neutral way throughout the war."(p.625)   Kishlansky cited Clement Walker (1647) who observed that in the early 17th century "The leading men or grandees first divided themselves into two factions, or juntoes of presbyterian and independent," (*ibid*). Kishlansky concluded: "In this sense, 'party' came to describe a new method of political action, one which implied a corruption of the old political system—more explicitly, the pursuit of self-interest against the common good."(p.626).

On the legal front, a parallel adversary system of justice has emerged not much later, no doubt under similar influences.   However, this adversary system is thought to serve the public interest better. Landsman (1983a), a staunch advocate of the adversary system, began his widely cited article on the development of the adversary system thus: "Since approximately the time of the American Revolution, courts in the United States have employed a system of procedure that depends on a neutral and passive fact finder (either judge or jury) to resolve disputes on the basis of information provided by contending parties during formal proceedings."(p.713)   The "neutral

an passive fact finder" role is a key feature of the common law system that distinguishes itself from the civil law (continental law) system which gives the presiding judge an active investigative role to seek the truth using all sources of information. The civil law system has been described as a comprehensive system of rules and general principles codified to spell out the rights and obligations of citizens. However, the intent of both the civil law system and the common law system is identical, namely, to further the public interest. Even though the civil law system is less based on case laws and more on doctrines and principles that are the results of collective wisdom accumulated over time, the civil law ostensibly also changes with the times.

The non-adversarial civil law tradition has a long history in Europe and serving the public interest is very much a Western tradition. In the words of Dainow (1966-1967):

> In the course of time these jurists came to enjoy the very highest prestige in the law; emperors and magistrates not only sought their consultation and advice but in general followed and adopted their opinions. During this time, not a matter of years or generations but of centuries, some efforts were made to coordinate and group the rules of law;…to compile the results of a very large number of actual case decisions…. It was against this background…that Emperor Justinian brought together the great jurists of his day and had them compile the body of law that immortalized his name."(Dainow, p.421)

The tradition gave rise to the doctrine of *jurisprudence constante,* that holds that a consistent line of court decisions on a particular legal issue forms an authoritative and binding precedent and thus represents collective wisdom that upholds the public interest. Accordingly, "Judges' decision is less crucial in shaping civil law than the decisions of legislators and legal scholars who draft and interpret the codes."[3] Today civil or continental law is still very much a European system and that means it is not inimical to western civilization.

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[3] See Law, C. (2017). The common law and civil law traditions.
https://www.law.berkeley.edu/wpcontent/uploads/2017/11/CommonLawCivilLawTraditions.pdf

To Landsman, it is important to uphold the adversary legal system because it helps preserve key values in society that include "freedom from restraint on economic and political action, tolerance of change in both business and social relations, and willingness to adjudicate questions not previously considered by society." He was particularly worried about the overreach of government (Landsman, 1983b, p.7) which will be effectively countered by a "neutral and fact-finding role" of the judiciary process. While the need for judiciary independence is beyond dispute, however, the presumption that an inquisitorial approach will be biased is wrong. Finding the truth is a win for society; upholding justice is the ultimate value. Whether the common law system or the civil law system better serves public interest is an empirical question and is not determined a priori by our "values." In principle, whether in politics or in law, the final values remain to be serving the best interest of the people. This is true in the West as it is true in the East.

Unfortunately, as human experience unfolds, the problems arising from adversarial processes have become more and more apparent, and they stem from vested interests who care not for societal values but for private interests. Today the prevalence of adversarial processes both in law and in politics over several centuries has led many Westerners to identify adversarial processes as a key characteristic of Western culture and even a Western value. This is notwithstanding the fact that the adversarial mentality is not intrinsic to Western civilization, and that enlightened political historian/scientists in America today, including Kishlansky (1977), Jane Mansbridge (1983) and Jason Brennan (2016), and Hudson (2022) have agreed that the adversarial political system could be detrimental to the best interests of the country.

To Michael Hudson (2022), the idea of fighting for one's private interests somehow laid "the fatal seeds of its own economic polarization, decline, and fall." Hudson pointed out that "the Greek concept of hubris involved egotisitc behavior causing injury to others. Avarice and greed were to be punished by the justice goddess Nemesis." "Divine kingship," rather than leaders chosen by population election, was obliged to protect the weak from the powerful. These concepts bear much resemblance to Chinese beliefs. Yet with the equating of democracy to ballot box politics in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights laid the seed for antagonism between the West and China and could lead to unnecessary conflicts and even war. Just as the

superiority between civil law system and the common law system should be tested empirically, so should the superiority between electoral democracy and selecting the leadership through a fair and transparent procedure.

3. **Culture, Soft Infrastructure, and Infrastructure Logics**

Culture, norms and values, laws and institutions have been referred to as soft infrastructure. "Soft" refers to their non-physical nature. "Infrastructure" refers to the fact that they take time to build and that once built they will stay for a long time and will form part of the environment in which we live.   An example is neo-liberalism (Béland, 2005, p. 2). A specific example is the Right to Buy pioneered by Margaret Thatcher that started in the United Kingdom in the 1980s[4]. It was replicated in Hong Kong in the form of the Tenants Purchase Scheme (TPS) launched in 1998.   The Right to Buy did not enjoy a good reputation in the UK.[5] Yet it found its way to Hong Kong and led to similar consequences.[6]

Generally speaking, the heritage of a country's values and culture has primacy over new ideas. For instance, the failure of the US to adopt a nation-wide health insurance programme is linked to its the unique political culture in America (Steinmo and Watts, 1995).[7] Collier & Collier in authors' note to the 2002 edition of their book (originally published 1991) on Latin America, remarked: "Today it is even clearer that with the rise of neoliberalism in national economic policies, the partial eclipse of union power… Latin America is in the midst of fundamental political change." (p.xv) A key question that we need to ask is: If public policy is always affected by the prevalent culture, is there a culture that we should nurture that will allow policy changes consistent with the public interest?

Relative to neo-liberalism, the caste system of India perhaps stands at the opposite end of the cultural spectrum as it is anything but liberal. Again it is very much constraining on social and political development all the same. It has had pervasive impacts on the Indian economy (Munshi,

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[4] The Housing Act that laid out the framework of Right to Buy was passed into law in 1980.

[5] See https://www.theguardian.com/society/2022/jun/29/how-right-to-buy-ruined-british-housing

[6] It had benefited some original tenants and some speculators. But Hong Kong's homeownership did not go up, and the wait for public housing kept getting longer.

[7] Steensland (2006) similarly associated America's objection to the guaranteed income policy with America's culture.

2019). The system has generated substantial inefficiencies in critical areas, such as labor allocation, whereby the full development of human capital in India became impossible (Thorat & Newman, 2007). Previous studies also show that these impacts extend beyond economic activity, affecting access to public resources and well-being. For instance, recent evidence (Shaikh *et al*., 2018) suggests that the caste to which individuals belong significantly predicts inequalities in the waiting time for non-emergency medical care. The endurance of the caste system through centuries notwithstanding formal abolition in 1948 is explained by the nature of institutional logics, which are organizing principles that are "*symbolically grounded, organizationally structured, politically defended, and technically and materially constrained*" (Friedland & Alford, 1991, pp. 248–249).

Boltanski and Thenevot (2006) offered important insights to the dynamics that drive the change of institutional logics. They argue that people justify what they say and do by appealing to principles they hope will command respect, which are otherwise known as "values" or "worth". They distinguished different categories of worth in six different worlds: market, inspired, domestic, fame, civic, and industrial. Each of these institutional orders have conceptions, models, or logics at the supra-organizational level, which shape organizational and individuals' activities and which may simply be called way of life or culture. For instance, in the world of fame, the logic of people's reputation assignment depends only on the opinion of others which is based exclusively on people's attributes. In contrast, in the domestic world, worth is rooted in a hierarchical chain of dependency relations. One's reputation is based on the capacity to encompass the will of subordinates. Importantly, culture is a resource of agency (DiMaggio, 1997).

Let us go back to the Right to Buy mentioned in the beginning of this Section. The Right to Buy was introduced against the background of Thatcherism, which in turn is based on the idea of "big market, small government" and privatizing enterprises and properties that are in the public domain and the belief that management by private actors will always be superior to public management. Private actors are believed to be always more efficient than civil servants or government-paid officials. In fact, however, there is little proof that this is indeed the case (Mühlenkamp, 2013). The Mass Transit Railway Corporation was established on 22 September 1972 as a government-owned statutory corporation to build and operate a mass transit railway

system to meet Hong Kong's massive public transport needs. For years, the company has gained very high reputation as a well-managed company. Moreover, even when cost savings are achieved when a service is outsourced through a tendering process, the result still need not reflect an improvement in efficiency. When lower paid workers replace higher paid workers, even when there are real cost savings there need not be a gain in efficiency. There may be just a rise in poorly paid workers, and there may also be other problems. The prevalence of subcontracting and sub-subcontracting in the construction industry has led to safety issues and occasional disruptions in services when a subcontractor fails to pay their workers and goes into liquidation. Still, the ideology of "big market, small government" had the upper hand just because among some circles it is held like a doctrine. The Housing Authority in Hong Kong announced the TPS on December 8, 1997. Ho and Wong (2006) found evidence that Hong Kong's first officially recorded recession in 1998, at -5.9% and much worse than that of Singapore (-2.2%), is more related to the Tenants Purchase Scheme than to the Asian Financial Crisis.

Consider America's persistent failure to contain gun violence. Like cancer, gun violence is metastasizing, with Americans acquiring increasingly deadlier firearms traditionally reserved for the battlefield (Shapiro, 2021). The Second Amendment to the American Constitution reads: "A well-regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed." The right to gun ownership is embodied in a legal corpus. Once institutionalized and blessed with political interests, gun ownership is almost impossible to curb and regulate. America did not consciously choose to be the world's top country in gun ownership per capita, but became such through the working of institutional logics. In 2008, the United States Supreme Court ruled that the Second Amendment confers an individual the inalienable right to possess a firearm for traditionally lawful purposes such as self-defence (Supreme Court of the United States, 2008). Moreover, it ruled that two earlier District of Columbia provisions, one banning handguns and the other requiring the disassembly or trigger-locking of lawful household firearms, violated this right. Since that ruling, gun-related deaths have increased, with the crude rate (number of gun-related deaths per 100,000) rising

from 10.34 before the ruling to 11.16 in the 2009-2019 period[8] (See **Table 1**). The rate continued to rise through 2021.

Table 1: Gun-Related Deaths in the USA (1999-2021)

Year	Number of deaths (cumulative)	Population (cumulative)	Crude Rate	Age-Adjusted Rate
2021	482,676	4,167,145,163	11.58	n.a.
2020	433,846	3,830,150,539	11.33	n.a.
2009-2019	390,293	3,498,701,258	11.16	11.16
1999-2008	301,464	2,915,941,237	10.34	10.34

Note: age-adjusted rate was provided by CDC but cannot be provided for 2020 and 2021 for lack of information.
Source: CDC, US Census Bureau, Gun Violence Archive

According to a recent Gallup Poll, the majority of Americans have always been in favor of tighter regulation. This is unsurprising given that there are nearly 400 million guns in civilian hands in the United States, which translates into a staggering 120.5 civilian-held firearms per 100 residents (Small Arms Survey, 2018). From 1990 to 2007, the percentage of Americans in favor of tighter regulation had initially declined precipitously from 78% to 51%, which facilitated the Supreme Court's decision to rule in favor of relaxing regulation. This decline in the support of tighter regulation reached an all-time low of 43% in 2011, which nonetheless still significantly outnumbered the 12% favouring less control. In the ensuing years, the proportion in favor of stricter gun control has generally been on the uptrend, reaching a high of 67% in 2018 (Gallup, 2022). Mass shootings over the last years have contributed to this surging demand for tighter regulation (Politi, 2012). The apparent futility of clear and continuing public preference for tighter gun control testifies to the extent to which an institutional logic embodied in the Second Amendment compromises the interests and well-being of Americans.

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[8] The increase from 10.34 to 11.16 may appear small, but it is significant, as the rates refer to averages over a decade.

4. What Culture and Ideology Will Make a Better World?

In the last section, we have underscored the primacy of culture and ideology through the role of institutional logics. An interesting question is what kind of culture and ideology can be embodied in our institutions which can guide individuals' actions for the best interest of humanity. Antonella Delle Fave *et.al*. (2016) and Ho (2014) offered some clue. Fave *et.al.* underscored "the primacy of inner harmony and relational connectedness" as lay principles of happiness; the latter pointed out that culture determines how different people procure their mental goods and physical goods in different ways. The former concluded that "Over and above differences related to country membership, cultural dimensions, and demographic features, [there is] a substantial similarity across countries in the core definitions of happiness. At the psychological level, happiness was predominantly identified as inner harmony, a balanced and positive connectedness perceived among various facets of the self." Ho suggests that what people see as values that are central to their wellbeing mostly reflect culture-bound "household production" for their ultimate values. People adopt different lifestyles to acquire similar "end goods" (such as nutrients and tastes of food and a sense of achievement) that are essential to wellbeing. But if we share common, universal values, there should exist a culture and ideology that will make a better world. The problem is: even if we know, the dynamics of institutional logics may prevent us from achieving it!

Tim Kasser (2003) has identified materialistic culture to be extremely detrimental to subjective well-being. Ho (2014) explained that the materialistic lifestyle often just represents an inefficient way of procuring the mental goods that all human beings need, such as a sense of achievement, being accepted by the social group which one identifies with through acculturation (for example, having supposedly refined tastes so one could belong to the perceived "right social circles"). Under the influence of culture, people procure similarly needed mental goods in different ways. The inefficiency of the rat race (i.e. "keeping up with the Joneses") is demonstrated by the fact that one's production of a needed mental good (such as perception of being recognized and accepted in an identified social circle) destroys the mental good of one's neighbors. Meanwhile ecological footprint shoots through the roof, further exacerbating the climate crisis, and undermining the long-term welfare of everybody. This inefficiency contrasts

with the efficiency of a culture of identifying with those who opt for a simple but still wholesome life. Recognizing that culture has important implications for economic efficiency, we need to build a culture that facilitates the procurement of mental goods that are needed for well-being and yet are non-rival in nature. As shown by Shekhar *et al*. (2020) in the case of India, changes in institutional logics of the market have the potential to affect individuals' consumption practices.

2020 was evidently a tumultuous year for America. There was the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic that plunged the economy into a deep recession, which was subsequently followed by the "Black Lives Matter" movement. These events preceded the divisive Presidential Election that culminated in the controversial siege on Capitol Hill by Trump supporters on January 6, 2021. The trigger for these developments could possibly be the sheer divisiveness of American society. to the extent that a Google search on "Divided States of America" quickly yielded multiple entries; the most provocative being the CNN Fareed Zakaria Special Report on "How to Watch THE DIVIDED STATES OF AMERICA", posted on January 31, 2021. This destructive divisiveness did not emerge overnight but had been brewing and simmering for decades, underscoring the fact that America sorely lacks a culture of reciprocity and mutual respect.

Fundamental to these divisions is a common disconnect of many Americans with people that they consider alien; a 2019 study by Claire L. Adida, Adeline Lo and Melina L. Platas (2019) indicates that many Americans seem to prefer immigrants who are English-speaking and Christian. What matters is not at all who people consider alien. What really matters is that somehow in one's upbringing, one develops this invidious sense of "me" or "my kind" versus "them", sowing the seeds for the rise of destructive tribalism. Once tribalism emerges, extremist and opportunistic politicians will take advantage of the divisiveness in society, touting their supposedly nativist policies. In this divisive and contentious landscape, facts and meaningful policy debates are discarded. The ugly aspects of tribalism would supplant reasoning, invariably creating bitter divisions in the country. [9] Actually, this fixation on identities leading to

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[9] Zakaria referred to two books, "Identity Crisis," by John Sides, Michael Tesler and Lynn Vavreck and "Why we are polarized," by Ezra Klein, in his Special Report.

discrimination and racism goes against an important tenet in the Declaration of Independence which proclaims that "all men are created equal."[10]

But democracy does not have to be like this. Whereas the route to disaster is based on fixed identities, transcending fixed identities would enhance the public interest and by extension lead to happiness. Transcending fixed identities is understandably difficult but not impossible. Transcending fixed identities is difficult only because those fixed identities were built up over a long stretch of time. Fixation on identities is the soft infrastructure that has led to polarization. To address this problem, Lijphart (1999) proposed the concept of "consensus democracy", which stands in contrast to the simple majority rule or "Westminster democracy."   He insisted consensus democracy is better than majoritarian democracy, and stated that the first dimension of consensus democracy involves "multiparty face-to-face interactions within cabinets, legislatures, legislative committees, and concertation meetings between governments and interest groups has a close fit with the collective-responsibility form."(p.5) But consensus is difficult to form unless everybody is prepared to perform the Rawlsian "veil of ignorance" thought experiment in forgetting one's identity *before* assessing the impact of a policy (i.e., "*ex ante*" assessment of the merit of a policy without a vested interest). This would then naturally consider fully the interests of minorities because, *ex ante,* one could be a member of any minority. If minorities' interests are taken care of and the goal of public policy is maximizing the *ex ante* interpretation of the public interest (Ho, 2012), the focus of the political system should be preventing power abuse through effective public governance rather than on elections. Shifting of the focus on fair competition among interest groups to fend for their different *ex post* private interests to effective governance to enhance the *ex ante* public interest based on impartial assessment of policy alternatives is the way out.

While an operational definition of the public interest seemed elusive for half a century[11], Ho (2012) proposed to salvage the possibility of consensus by following the Rawlsian veil of ignorance thought experiment. Under this "*ex ante*" approach, if we momentarily put down our

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[10] Klein (2020) argues that the American political system boils down to a collection of functional parts whose efforts combine into a dysfunctional whole.

[11] Downs (1962) noted that "no general agreement exists about whether the term [public interest] has any meaning at all, or, if it has, what the meaning is, which specific the public interest actions are in the public interest and which are not, and how to distinguish between them." (pp.1-2)

identities and interests specific to those identities, and imagine that our identities are to be determined by a wheel of fortune beyond our control, we would certainly object to slavery. If I could be black, male or female, straight or LGBT, Muslim or Christian, etc., I would form an impartial judgment about policies or any institutional arrangement. This exercise is fundamentally no different from asking people to "put themselves in the shoes of others." Only when one momentarily relinquishes one's identity and considers the impact of policy change on different people would one truly "connect" to others. Although we are all different *ex post*, we are all equal *ex ante* (before the wheel of fortune determines our identities).

Rawlsian thinking invariably seems antithetical to our nature. Because we are used to the identities that we have formed over the years, putting down our identities when we assess the impact of public policy is not instinctive for most of us. But seeing the connectedness of everyone in the community is the only way out of polarization and the conflicts that have caused extensive human suffering throughout history.

To move toward a world of connected humanity, it is critical to reiterate that the fixation on identities has to be attenuated. Institutions that reduce identity fixations need to be enshrined in each country's constitution to facilitate "a connected humanity". Only then the public interest defined in the *ex ante* sense can trump tribal instincts, which have become more pronounced with increasing use of digital communication (Bazalgette, 2017). The spirit of this proposed move is perhaps encapsulated in Singapore's national pledge: *"We, the citizens of Singapore, pledge ourselves as one united people, regardless of race, language or religion, to build a democratic society based on justice and equality so as to achieve happiness, prosperity and progress for our nation."*; the attenuation of identity fixations explains the multicultural harmony of this tiny island-state, which in turn is instrumental for its stunning economic success since gaining independence from Malaysia in 1965 (National Heritage Board, 2023). This paper advocates nurturing this perspective, in view of the public interest, as it is a critical means of building societal cohesion. Back in 1962, Anthony Downs wrote "it might be argued that the ultimate motive for good citizenship, even for patriots, is the long-run self-interest of the individual." (Downs, 1962: 27). The *ex ante* perspective to public policy is what it takes to look after the long-run self-interest of each individual, because in an all-out fight among those with fixed identities and interests, no one can be sure who the final winner will be. The only certainty is

that over the course of the fight, everybody loses. All in all, there is a growing urgency to build a culture of interconnectedness among people across ethnicities and different walks of life.

5. A Roadmap to a Better Tomorrow for the World

5.1 Making Peace among Religions and Political Ideologies

Two key divides that tear humanity apart into different and sometimes opposing camps are religion and political ideology. Both are topics that attract heated argument that many people avoid to bring up in discussions because often the arguments are often not real dialogues

An article posted in 2017 by the American Psychological Association on its website referred to "a growing tide of Islamophobia" in America (Clay, 2017: 34). This is evidenced in an earlier 2015 Council on American-Islamic Relations study which showed that of the more than 600 Muslim students surveyed, more than half had experienced bullying—twice as high as the national average (Council on American-Islamic Relations- California Chapter, 2015). A Southern Poverty Law Center report released in February 2017 found that the number of organized anti-Muslim hate groups had jumped from 34 in 2015 to 101 in 2016. There is little doubt that the fear of Muslim domination is one of the drivers behind Islamophobia. Such paranoia could sometimes lead to tragic circumstances. For instance, Anders Breivik, a Norwegian far-right extremist gruesomely massacred 69 participants (mostly teenagers) attending a Workers' Youth League (AUF) summer camp on 22 July 2011 using semiautomatic firearms. Earlier in the day, he had detonated a bomb in the center of Oslo that killed eight people and injured another 209 (Smith, 2018); Breivik tried to justify his heinous acts in a manifesto which declared his resolve to stop "the Islamic colonization of Western Europe" (Reuters, 2011).

Unfortunately, such fears have their roots in otherwise harmless demographics (Elżbieta & Péter, 2018). Research from the Pew Research Center indicates that Muslim women have on average 2.9 children, surpassing the next-highest group (Christians at 2.6) and significantly exceeding the average of all non-Muslims (2.2 children) (Lipka and Hackett, 2017). Moreover, if all the children of Muslims are initiated by their parents to become Muslims, there is fear that

Muslims would soon outnumber non-Muslims. In a democracy that respects the majority rule, non-Muslims naturally fear that they are outnumbered by Muslims and that their society and their laws could change, leading to a loss of their original identity. By the same token, for those of us who are used to electoral democracy, any political system that is not based on the ballot box and party rotation is often considered alien to us and undemocratic. A rising China that does not practice party rotation and periodic elections of the nation's leaders may be perceived by many as a threat to "our democratic values."

The way out would be a strong constitution that is based on the enshrinement of the *ex ante* approach to public policy and public institutions. A country with its constitution grounded on a new Universal Declaration of Human Rights will ensure that all its citizens enjoy the same rights and freedoms so that no majority vote can overturn it. The revised Universal Declaration of Human Rights will make sure that in every country, each person shall have the freedom to choose his religion and shall have equal political rights.

Freedom to choose one's religion means only adults above the age of 18 will be deemed mature enough to freely choose one's religion or decide not to subscribe to any religion at all. This means that Muslim parents as well as the parents of any religion should not initiate their newborns into their own religions. Equal political rights means that if a country does not practice electoral democracy, its people should still have equal rights to compete for political positions through their own merit according to a transparent selection mechanism. Countries should be free to decide its own political system.

5.2 Transcendence as the Glue to Connect Different Religions & Different Peoples

Since the theologies of different religions are mutually incompatible, differences in theology among religions should be taken as merely reflecting the cultural and historical backgrounds at the time of their inception. This is the only way to avoid irreconcilable conflicts and clashes. Respect being a universal value, every religion or sect should respect each other's theological beliefs. Thus, the separation of church and the state is logical and is a civilized institution as no religion or church should wield political power that may enable it to dominate over other

religions or non-believers. Throughout history, there have been innumerable religious conflicts and wars. This is notwithstanding the fact that economic and social factors often come into play. Matthew White's *The Great Big Book of Horrible Things* named religion as the primary cause of 11 of the world's 100 deadliest atrocities. Separation of the Church and the State would have helped avoid these tragic conflicts.

Minkov M, Welzel C and Schachner M (2020) noted that "numerous studies have reported a positive individual-level association between happiness and two psychologically distinct states of mind: religious faith and subjective freedom" (Minkov, Welzel and Schachner, 2020: 2873). But what is it in religiosity that makes people happy? One interesting finding of the paper is that subjective freedom and religious faith appear to be substitutes in furthering subjective well-being. One interpretation of this result is that religious faith is itself a source of subjective freedom as all religions ask us to be humble. Paul Wong (2016) makes the case that transcending the ego gives one meaning and enables one to realize one's best. Anyone who does this, even if one does not have a religion, finds subjective freedom because one will be free from the many incumbrances caused by a strong ego. No wonder many recent studies (Dambrun & Ricard, 2011) have found self-transcendence an important driver of happiness and this quality is a common denominator among religions. Transcendence is about focusing less on the ego, and connecting more with our humanity (Hanfstingl, 2013; Ho, 2014; Ho, 2024). The essence of transcendence is perhaps best captured by the Buddhist philosophy of "letting go of the self" and focusing less on the distinctions or concepts of "the self, the others, the living beings, and the lifetime" (Dhyana Master Hsüan Hua, 2000: 181). Indeed transcendence has long been associated with freedom in the literature (Hart, 1951). Maslow (1959) has described self-transcendence as a confluence of intense emotional responses comprising "wonder, surprise, awe, amazement, reverence, humility and surrender before the experience as before something great". Spiritual living is living with a deep respect for life; at its core, it involves developing a connectedness to humanity and nature, in the process liberating one from self-centeredness. With this premise, it is clear that the all-encompassing nature of transcendence is the ultimate antidote against divisiveness and the "identity crisis."

5.3. Evolution toward Truly Open Institutions

We could distinguish between two kinds of institutions (Ho, 2012). An "open" institutional design based on institutional logics and mechanisms that actively facilitate "improving with the times," or passively allow such adaptations. A "closed" institutional design on the other hand provides little incentive for people to change even if they could, while those in favour of change may be blocked from effecting any change. A closed institutional design is closed typically because vested interests protect their interests through monopolizing power, or because society has come to accept the prevailing rules, values, and practices as sacrosanct and not to be challenged. Those holding on to power tend to emphasise these rules, values, and practices to maintain their power and privileges.

Sadly, although governments based on periodic elections may still lack effective mechanisms that prevent power abuses and may still be subject to short-termism and the dictates of vested interests. Indeed, even in America, Gilens and Page (2014) found that "economic elites and organized groups representing business interests have substantial independent impacts on U.S. government policy, while average citizens and mass-based interest groups have little or no independent influence" (Gilens and Page, 2014: 564). Today, America is classified under "flawed democracies" in the EIU Democracy Index ranking (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2021). Zakaria (1997) coined the term "illiberal democracies" to describe regimes that are "illiberal" and that trample on people's civic rights notwithstanding the fact that they hold regular elections. Notwithstanding being democracies in name, many countries could be trapped in a perpetual cycle of power grabbing among various contending interests that could lead to social unrest and the erosion of public interest. From this perspective, governments that are formally democratic may still not be sufficiently open to allow evolution toward the betterment of all stakeholders. An "open" regime with plenty of levers for interest groups to work on without regard to the public interest is not good enough. In a world dominated by powerful business interests capable of influencing politics almost exclusively, it is all too easy for these powerful business interests to collude with politicians to the detriment of the interests of the common man.

6. Conclusion: The Challenges Facing Humanity

Western civilization is not adversarial politics. In fact, civilization should not carry the label Eastern or Western. Being civilized means taking the universal values of freedom, respect (which means equal treatment as human beings), peace, love, and sustainable development seriously. Being true progress is becoming more civilized. Getting an advantage at the expense of others not through fair play is not true progress. Mistaking means for ends is not progress. True human progress cannot be advanced with people in power holding onto dogmas and dictating their will on others.

What gave China's economy a rebirth was a new way of thinking that had ancient roots but that had been suppressed by political forces under the power of ideology[12]. Similarly, Western democracy needs a new way of thinking that puts the real interests of people first, instead of allowing the inertia of divisive politics to prevail over the public interest. This requires rebuilding our soft infrastructure to this end. This is emphatically not the "end of Western civilization" as Hudson suggested, but rather the revival of Western civilization as it was two thousand years ago and as it is championed by a few lone philosophers and political scientists like Kant, Jung, Rawls, Mansbridge, and Brennan today.

Western institutions possess many fine traditions. In particular, the Separation of Powers, Separation of the Church and the State, the Free Press, Free Speech, the Rule of Law, etc., are important pillars of civilization that should be preserved. These fine traditions are grounded on the "ethics of reciprocity", a universal value that has been called the Golden Rule. It is as central to Judaic and Christian teachings as it is to Confucian and Buddhist teachings. In the Sermon on the Mount (Gospel according to St. Matthew) Jesus taught: "All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them."   The Mosaic law contains a parallel commandment: "Whatever is hurtful to you, do not do that to others."   Similarly Confucius advised: "Don't do unto others what you don't want others do unto you." (The Analects). More recently, Rawls invented the "veil of ignorance" thought experiment, and asked us to put ourselves in the shoes of others. There is some debate over whether the thought exercise should

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[12] Mao Zedong had condemned Confucianism. See Gregor and Chang (1979)

lead to "maximin" as policy advice. Maximin or maximizing the welfare of the most unfortunate person in the community and completely ignoring the effects on all the others could be too extreme. It could be argued that policy choices should instead be made from the *ex ante* perspective: simply maximizing *ex ante* welfare, which results when policy makers assume that we could be anyone in the community, i.e., when policy choices are evaluated impartially.

Unfortunately, today in many Western societies excessive emphasis has often been placed on individualist rights and freedoms, often eroding the public interest. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, many Americans refused to wear masks and social distancing, and other measures that were necessary to contain the spread of the infections. The result was disastrous. America became the country with the most infections and deaths. This is obviously a breach of the Golden Rule at the individual level: You want to be protected from Covid-19. You prefer that others not far from you wear masks so you will be protected. So you would wear masks when you are physically close to others.

All this appears clear and reasonable enough. But soft infrastructure being what it is, the ideology of individualistic freedom is hard to change; expecting religious fundamentalists and anti-science zealots to shed their dogmas and strive toward enlightenment is likely to be expecting too much; most of those who subscribe to the materialistic culture will continue to ignore the impending existential threat to our planet earth as the only home of humanity and other species. Overcoming this inertia is the challenge that humanity now faces.

At the policy level, upholding the Golden Rule means that we should opt for universal healthcare, more effective regulation of firearms, and better protection of human lives in general. If there had been more effective regulation of semiautomatic weapons, Anders Breivik would not have been able to commit his massacre (at least not to the same degree) in 2011. Similarly, Salvador Ramos would not have been able to gun down and kill 21 students and staff of an elementary school in Uvalde, Texas in May 2022 in under an hour.

Consider the following excerpt from an article posted in City Journal on "Katrina and Pork" in 2005:

…. increasingly Congress uses the growing federal budget to serve the narrow interests of its members, circumventing the traditional budget process and skirting procedures for competitive bidding to insert favored projects directly into appropriations legislation. The process, euphemistically called earmarking, "has become so routine and so pervasive . . . that what was once a boon for the most powerful and favored has become an expected way for local governments and other institutions to get aid from Washington," wrote the *Congressional Quarterly* last year (Malanga, 2005).

We can see that attention for personal, private interests, instead of the public interest, was very much behind the subpar design and maintenance of the levees that led to 1,833 tragic and avoidable deaths in New Orleans (Pruitt, 2020). Central to the disaster is that politicians were preoccupied with pleasing their constituents and that voters prefer to protect their short-term private interests first. It was short-sightedness and selfishness rather than a lack of funds that caused 2005's Hurricane Katrina disaster. Lawrence Roth, the then Deputy Executive Director of the American Society of Civil Engineers had called it "the worst engineering catastrophe in U.S. history" (Roth, 2007). Moreover, Adrienne LaFrance of the Atlantic, based on research from the University of California at Berkeley, found that "Some levees were constructed atop too-weak soil, others contained too much sand and other highly erodible material that washed away in the storm surge" (LaFrance, 2015). In short, the levees were simply not built to provide meaningful protection.

The above debacle, amongst many others, are not isolated failures but are indicative of the negative soft infrastructure that has become endemic in our lives. It is indeed difficult to rebuild soft infrastructure. The inertia of the human mind has to be reckoned with. For this reason, the "roadmap" for a better tomorrow is fraught with significant difficulties which would require collective understanding and resolve to overcome. But to ponder the alternative is frightening.

Back in 1997 Fareed Zakaria warned of "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy" in Foreign Affairs. Since that time, liberal democracy appears to be in retreat everywhere. In the Western world, we are seeing increasing polarization across many countries. An Economist feature story

in 2020 carried the title: "Political protests have become more widespread and more frequent" and the subtitle warns: "The rising trend in global unrest is likely to continue."

Amid all the confusion, the Democracy Perception Index (DPI) survey (Latana and the Alliance of Democracies Foundation, 2022) found that people living in many democracies often think that their countries are not genuinely democratic, while China, a country widely considered to be authoritarian had an 83% rating for "My Country is Democratic." The relatively poor performance of the US and France in DPI could be attributable to rising income inequality and the growing influence of "Big Business" on public policy; "Big Business" and related organizations spent nearly US$4 billion lobbying the US government in 2021 alone (O'Connell and Narayanswamy, 2022). In the case of the US, the percentage of people surveyed who believe their government acts in the interest of a minority (i.e. "Big Business") is a staggering 63%, significantly higher than the global average of 49%. Dr Nico Jaspers, CEO of Latana, lamented: "Democracy is under threat. In many countries across the world, people feel that their governments are acting in the interest of a small elite, and economic inequality and corruption are among the biggest threats to democracy."

This apparent siege on democratic institutions is also evidenced from other sources in the literature. From 2006 to 2021, the global average for the EIU's democracy index (see following **Chart 1**) declined from 5.52 to 5.28 over this period. Freedom House painted this gloomy picture with an article titled "Freedom under Siege" in its 2021 update: "The impact of the long-term democratic decline has become increasingly global in nature… Nearly 75 percent of the world's population lived in a country that faced deterioration last year." But humanity's quest for equality, checking power abuses, and personal freedoms has not abated. The rising protests across many countries show that governments everywhere are under pressure to improve public governance.

Presently the world is fraught with fractious politics and tension driven by the apparent ideological confrontation between the world's two leading powers China and the US. But the difference between China and the US lies mainly in their preferred means to achieving effective public governance. If we are genuinely interested in people's wellbeing, both should explore

scientifically what institutions would best serve their interests. We are supposed to live in the age of science and enlightenment. By supplanting ideology and unbridled individualism with pragmatism and altruism, we can eliminate societal ills and enhance the welfare of individuals worldwide.

Chart 1: Democracy Index Global Average (2006-2021)
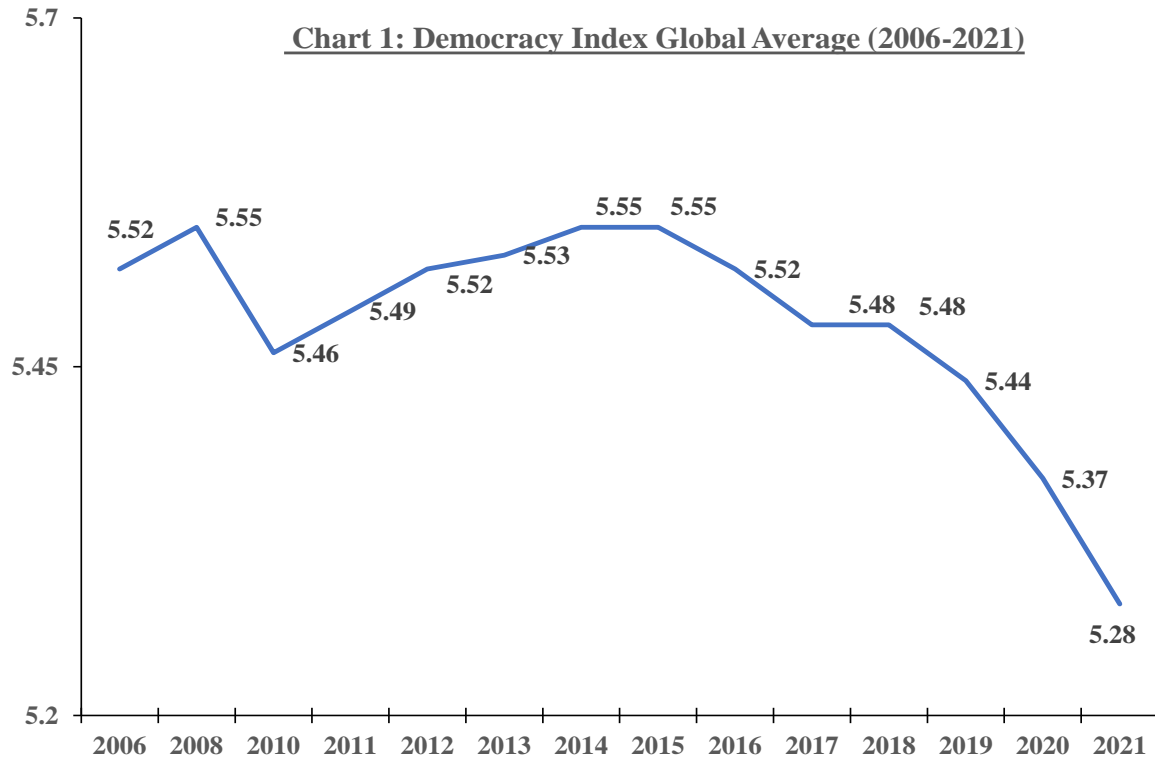
Source: The Economist Intelligence Unit (2020, 2021)

At the country level, checks against power abuses through an independent press and free speech within the framework of the law, a truly independent judiciary, and institutions that guard against conflict of interests are all important soft infrastructures that have proven indispensable, as is the understanding that the public interest not only must come first but also be the only consideration in the design of public policy. The media, in particular, has significant responsibility for telling the truth all the time and educating the public about sustainable development and the Golden Rule of Reciprocity. This way, we can avoid the "we they" confrontations that Burton had lamented (Burton 1993).

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