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The Exponential Unhappiness of Gen Z: Part II

By PHILIP CHIVILY
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Since mankind became more physically settled with the Agricultural Revolution, most change had been glacially slow. Communities existed unchanged for centuries. Sure, things were generally more repressive and dangerous than they are now, but the basic units of a community, the family and village and religious institution, all endured. People's lives were hard, but in important ways they were happy. Then, after the Industrial Revolution, change and advancement on all fronts exponentially took off, and

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life changed forever. The fields of psychology and neurology emerged amid industrialization, and starting in the mid-20th century, members of the "Greatest Generation" and then the Baby Boom generation commonly began to pop pills to drug their brains in order to feel happier. And with the onset of the 21st century, this rapid change intensified. Things that were taboo among most people suddenly became acceptable among most. (Not that any of this change is somehow wrong. It is good that we live in an era when people can more freely express their own unique identities).

In addition, the basic tools that are required in modern life, such as phones, computers, and the Internet, all become at least partly outdated in a short time and we need replacements. In the past, appliances and tools were built as if to practically withstand a nuclear blast; they would last perhaps 30 years before they had to be replaced. The fast, sometimes exponential advancement in more recent technology has, in my view, done particular harm.

Some technologies have virtually destroyed fabrics of community and society which had existed for millennia, leaving humans weak, scared, and impotent in a new, unnatural state.

With the intensification of societal change and technological development in our century, and with Generation Z having to grow up with so little concrete sense of identity and community, such extensive unhappiness in people our age has rapidly followed. The effects appear in many ways. Many of Generation Z, seeking meaning in life while feeling deeply unhappy, begin adhering to dangerous fringe ideologies, whether it be on the extreme left or the extreme right.

The culture of Generation Z is both watered-down and nihilistic, with its artists typically creating sad, soulless works. (Even its meme culture, a fundamental part of its identity, is surreal and meaningless. One needs only to Google deep-fried memes, photos with so many filters applied to them for comedic effect that their original point is lost, to see this.) The effects have been tragic, as members of Generation Z so often cope with their unhappiness by obsessive, and often addictive, consumption of alcohol, drugs, and sex.

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What is the solution to Generation Z's unhappiness? Does one even exist? I don't know. I cannot say there is some antidote or silver bullet for this plague. The only solution I can see for our generation's unhappiness would be to end the hyper-industrialized, hyper-connected, and Internet-oriented system of exponential growth and change. Maybe then, Generation Z, and the rest of humanity including those yet to be born, could find peace and contentment.

The Course of Progress

By CASIMIR ZABLOTSKI
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Thomas Cole's *The Course of Empire* is a magnificent portrayal of the gradual rise, and poignant fall, of a civilization. In the painting's first scene, the sun is rising over a lush valley, an imposing crag dwarfs scantily clad hunters, and a cloudy horizon obscures the land beyond. Nature's sublimity and its power over man are stirring to the viewer.

As the day progresses, the valley's inhabitants have banded together and entered a pastoral state, the morning sky is brighter, and mankind's mark on the land more pronounced, with sustained agriculture and a rudimentary temple. Humanity has not yet abused or altered the valley much, but great development is clearly possible in this fertile region.

Next the sun is at its zenith, as is the city. A once-humble settlement is now the seat of a self-indulgent empire, its architecture obscuring the once-commanding ridge and its people merrily celebrating military triumph and civilizational glory. Intentionally reminiscent of ancient Rome, the city's decadence seems almost satirical, and likely unsustainable. Surely enough, as the afternoon light fades into a stormy evening, the city is embroiled in a bloody conflict, maybe a sacking by an external enemy, or perhaps a civil war. The delicately embellished buildings and stunning statues of war heroes cannot save it from its violent demise.

Finally, as the sun sets and a dim moon rises, little remains of the previously glorious city. A lone pillar in the foreground draws the viewer's eye. It once supported an empire but is now merely an overgrown home for a bird's nest, while the rocky precipice in the background remains untouched, nature having endured mankind's monumental hubris.

Americans remember Cole as the founder of the Hudson River School, a quasi-Romantic fraternity of painters who depicted vast, often untouched landscapes in a dramatic fashion. As the first American school of artists, these painters – especially Cole – were incredibly historically conscious, and their works were laden with social commentary. Cole painted *The Course of Empire* from 1833 to 1836, during a period of great change in American culture: the height of Jacksonian democracy and its emphasis on heralding

continued on back



progress. During this period, the concept of an evolving American frontier rose to prominence, with President Jackson's infamous Indian Removal Act and general westward expansion. To many, especially the Jacksonian Democrats, the growth of America's borders was part of a linear trajectory of improvement, the inevitable march of civilization. Cole disagreed, instead believing there was more cause for concern than hope. To Cole, no amount of continuous growth or seeming

into a world that has been in darkness for millennia. Lasch viewed liberals as beholden to capitalism, which he believed was both culturally destructive with its atomizing individualism and falsely alluring with its presumption that general economic growth – the gradual increase in metrics such as per capita GDP – would solve society's ills. And whoever espouses mainstream "conservatism" in America, Lasch argued, espouses an incoherent "conservatism

maintaining happiness in its simplicity and contentment in its unimaginativeness. They can be seen as something like Cole's pastoral stage of history – free of excessive materialism and ambition, preferring to care for the land, protect their families, and produce rather than consume.

For Lasch, such humble self-sufficiency is a desirable model. But Lasch's answer is unfulfilling. While one can attempt to exit from our modern world's dominant frontier-expanding,

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prosperity could triumph over the historical experience of past civilizations: man, and his anti-historical faith in the longevity of his creations, would always be self-defeating; and America, though worth cherishing, was also the next empire that would rise and eventually fall.

Regardless, westward the course of empire took its way. And when America ran out of land to acquire, it moved on to new frontiers, especially politically and economically with the "Pax Americana" (U.S.-dominated peace) following the end of World War II. Truly the zeitgeist of the post-Enlightenment, Americans conquered abstract frontiers once they had satisfied concrete ambitions. The renowned thesis of the historian Frederick Jackson Turner, that an obsession with the geographic frontier has defined American culture, has clear flaws and

against itself," fighting a culture war on inherently liberal, pluralistic, and capitalistic terrain that will never allow a true victory for traditional values.

In Lasch's view, then, most groups on the American political spectrum, and elsewhere in the Western world, have had an obsession with cultural or economic progress which leads them to assume that things would surely improve in the long run, that we will escape the once-formidable clamps of history and its limits -- as noted, for example, in Cole's painting. It was an obsession and assumption that Lasch considered naive and deeply misguided.

Has modern society truly insulated itself against the ebb and flow of time, transcending the cycle of rise and fall? Is the course of this empire one without finality -- will it never come to an end?

progressivist, growth-obsessed paradigm, becoming illegible to the rest of society and placing oneself at radical odds with its power structures, this is only a personal choice that does not change society, if it is even practical at all. Cole's decadent city remains unchanged even if a few flee it; arrogance trumps diminishing virtue. At what point do attempts to "exit" become a fatalistic, ineffectual "Benedict option" or purist monkish withdrawal -- the social commentator Rod Dreher's appealing but flawed recommendation?

A blind devotion to limitless progress and an unwavering belief in the modern world's longevity are highly questionable, and we should imagine an alternative. But the proper response is unclear. Some believe that we should, if possible, accelerate the decline of the capitalistic West. Others agree that Western

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is a limited reading of history. Rather, the passion for ever-expanding frontiers of all kinds is symptomatic of a larger obsession with unbridled advancement – what Christopher Lasch, a more recent and comparably prominent historian, believed is the dominant ideology of the Western world, a religion of progress.

Lasch took the religion of progress to be a reaction against longstanding moral values – a secular yet almost millenarian belief that the present was the cutting edge of cultural evolution. To reference the musical film *Hair*, it is almost an Aquarian conceit that a new age is gradually dawning that will correct injustices and let the sunshine

Or is Cole's stormy evening coming, the modern age having failed to live up to its expectations, with hope collapsing as increasingly fanatical groups fail to reconcile their ideologies with reality?

Lasch saw an answer to what he viewed as dangerous progressivist illusions in what have often been denigrated as *petit* (small or petty) *bourgeois* -- lower middle class, or non-affluent middle class -- sensibilities. Marxists distrust this group for its lack of class consciousness or relative apathy and its often-conservative politics, while advocates of capitalism look down on the *petit-bourgeoisie* for its supposed lack of ambition. Yet Lasch respected this in-between class for

capitalist power is waning, but argue that carefully tailored action should be taken to preserve it and its global influence. And many others genuinely believe that there is no great problem at hand – that the modern industrial-capitalist West is uniquely positioned to escape the traditional downward course of empire. The answer is unclear. But what seems clear is that the hyper-industrialized, no-limits present is just one day in a history that spans countless years, regardless of how long the sun stays up.

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