

8. The Group for Itself

Overview: This chapter seeks to open a discussion of human groups as self-serving entities with characteristic desires and goals that groups tend to have by their very nature. We will discuss why groups seek to grow, and certain problems that they incur in doing so. It will stress that while groups cannot literally control their members, they nonetheless, socialize, direct and use their members to achieve collective goals, often unhealthy for them as individuals. To illustrate how badly the groups interests can infringe on the personal desires and interests of its members, a review follows of R.J. Rummel's concept of democide. Following up on Section 7.2's argument for an issue-driven perspective on society and history, the chapter concludes with a personal take on the state of the worldmind today. We cannot know how our future will unfold, but can anticipate some more or less likely possibilities from a review of the central issues.

"The enemy," retorted Yossarian with weighted precision, "is anybody who's going to get you killed, no matter which side he's on, and that includes Colonel Cathcart. And don't you forget that, because the longer you remember it, the longer you might live."

Catch-22, by Joseph Heller

What does a group want? How can we know? We face these same questions dealing with people, but with groups there are two extra problems:

First, groups tend to be more ambivalent, more divided against themselves, than people usually are. We can usually tell what people want from what they are doing – going after. With groups this can be difficult because what a group cooperatively does is related only indirectly to what it collectively wants to have or do. Between the desire and the act, questions of feasibility and a complex political process may supervene. This can be true for individual persons also, but much more often and more confusingly for groups.

Second, the group can't directly tell us what it wants, as people can and do, once they have learned a few words of the local language. Groups can pass laws and write policy papers, but these reflect only what the governing officials collectively want: the outcome of their internal politics. What the group as a whole wants may be entirely different – as happened fatefully in Russia in 1914 when its Tsarist regime decided on a war with Austria and Germany, while the country as a whole chose something else.¹

1 See my account of the July Crisis in Section 6.3, and any brief account of the Russian revolution – for example, [this one](#).

For these reasons, it is always a matter of judgment and interpretation to decide what a group is really after – a subjective judgment to a large extent. Of course, this is true with individuals as well, but with groups, the question is more difficult. Still, at least in general terms, some answers can be given.

8.1 Group Desires and Intentions

We can only infer a group's desires and intentions backwards, from what it actually does. But we can note, in general, that groups have certain dynamic tendencies – all related, one way and another, to the evolutionary logic of survival and 'fitness.'

- Typically, groups want to stay together; and they make efforts to do so, even while falling apart. They defend their autonomy, and resist the domination (or outright takeover by others).
- They seek to prosper – to have comfortably and securely enough of everything that they need or want.
- They seek stability and resist change. They tend to fear, or at least dislike change, even when it seems likely to bring benefits.
- But, on the other hand, they welcome growth and readily become addicted to it – partly in the interests of security and prosperity, but partly for its own sake.
- Also, almost by definition, groups tend to want what their more influential members want, even when many less influential ones want just the opposite. When there are such differences, if its security, prosperity, stability or growth are seriously threatened, a group may work to negotiate, and to resolve the conflict through compromise. There is a tendency, however, for the group as a whole to desire, seek and settle for a working dispensation² based on the preferences of a stronger subgroup.

These five motives are observed so generally, in such a variety of groups and situations, that we are inclined – as discussed below – to see them as intrinsic to the nature of groups as such, and not as incidental features.

8.1.1 The Motive of Survival

Even a chicken wants to live – as a Yiddish proverb reminds us. What is true of chickens is true of other minding systems as well, groups included. To survive, a group needs to hold itself together, appropriate and/or produce what it needs for its livelihood, and defend its autonomy and its existence against competitors and enemies. This desire for survival can be inferred from the simple tautology of evolution: As Bateson put it, "Longer lasting patterns last longer than those which last not so long." Groups that don't desire much to survive – or fail to cultivate the solidarity to do so – don't hang around to be observed for any length of time.

² Defined in Section 1.4.2 and 6.4.

Groups want not just to continue in existence, but to feel sure and confident of doing so. They want security as well as simple survival. But it turns out that, in the long run, the quest for security is paradoxically self-defeating.

Their basic dilemma is that in the pursuit of security, groups come into conflict with other groups in search of security for themselves. Winners come to dominate the losers and typically exact some form of tribute; but in doing so, they over-reach themselves and incur resentment. A coalition gradually forms against them and, as it does, their demands for loyalty and tribute increase by corresponding steps in a vicious circle. As this cycle unfolds, their claims on others become tyrannous and their own solidarity is undermined by internal stresses. Eventually, their hegemonic position is lost – perhaps, their security as well. History has shown this pattern many times, as Paul Kennedy documented in his book on [*The Rise and Fall of Great Powers*](#). With the US today, we are seeing this pattern again.

8.1.2 The Motive of Prosperity

From one perspective, the desire for prosperity is a consequence of the desire for survival: It's just the wish to have securely enough of everything. But it contains a paradox, because we tend to think that if a little of something is good, then more of it must be better. This is especially true for groups which usually have no direct way of knowing when enough is enough.

Like the quest for security, that for prosperity also can be self-defeating, and for two reasons:

First, because it's very difficult to have enough of anything without having too much of it. To have enough, you must gear up to collect it or produce it; and once you have done so, that process takes on a life of its own, and may be difficult to stop. A well-known children's story, [*The Sorcerer's Apprentice*](#), originally a poem by Goethe, warns us of the danger in starting something that you don't know how to stop. Several other folk-tales have the same moral.

The concept of surplus as a problem may seem ridiculous because, for most of human history, the problem has almost always been the reverse. Even today in certain parts of the world, many people still find it difficult to get enough to eat. Still, the bare fact is that while most groups will organize to prosper, such prosperity as they achieve creates a surplus which will have to be distributed somehow. There will be conflicts over how this surplus is distributed; and, when reinvested, it will create an even bigger surplus. More on this below, in Section 8.1.4. Too much of anything is toxic – another point that Bateson liked to make.

Second, the pursuit of prosperity can be self-defeating, because it invites what economists call '[rent-seeking](#)' behaviours – the pursuit of wealth without creating new wealth. One classic example would be “the feudal lord who installs a chain across a river that flows through his land and then hires a collector to charge passing boats a toll for lowering the chain. As can be seen already in this simple case, rent-seeking reduces economic efficiency in sever-

al ways, by allocating resources to unproductive activities, by impeding commerce on the river, and by provoking conflict or war when some other baron covets the operation, and seeks to take it over. The conflict over [oil rights in the South China Sea](#) would be a modern, potentially much more dangerous example.

All-in-all, however, and dangerous as it can be, the search for prosperity beyond bare subsistence has been a driving force for civilization.

8.1.3 The Motive of Stability

Change is painful because it breaks habits and creates uncertainty. Groups tend to resist change until they are convinced that it is necessary. Even then, they tend to hold change to a minimum or hold it off as best they can.

Change is painful for at least two reasons. First, it disturbs habits and comfortable routines which may not work perfectly – nor even very well – but which are at least familiar and working to some extent. There is no guarantee at all, merely a hope or a conjecture, that the proposed change will work as well or better. The saying “[If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it](#),” appeared in a US Chamber of Commerce newsletter published in 1977, but the motto of one of Aesop’s fables – “[Leave well enough alone](#)” – says the same thing. Change is also painful because it always comes at someone’s expense. Indeed, the mere prospect of change will always raise difficult questions of “which change?” and “at whose expense?”

In short, change upsets the status quo (by definition); it generates irksome uncertainty; and, however advantageous to the group in general, it always entails costs that someone – but *who* exactly? – will have to bear. There will be conflicts to avoid the costs of change, to pass them on to someone else, if possible. These conflicts themselves will increase the cost.

For these reasons, groups nearly always resist change and show a preference for stability. On the other hand, the abuses of a working dispensation may be cruel, and the calls for reform – indeed, the need for it – may be very great. Changing conditions too may call for adaptation of some kind, or may present opportunities that some will wish to (and be able to) exploit. The group preference for stability will hamper both reform and adaptation, and will pose a real and chronic dilemma for idealists, activists – indeed for anyone who sees a little beyond the group’s immediate situation. To this dilemma, there is no easy answer.

8.1.4 The Motive of Growth

In 1973, George Land offered a general [theory of change](#) in a book called [Grow or Die: The Unifying Principle of Transformation](#). Without trying to summarize Land’s theory or critique it on its merits, I just want to say that its title is misleading. “*Grow and Die*” would give a more accurate idea about the fate of social systems. It is just not the case that death can be avoided by growing. In fact, as various business gurus have since pointed out, [growth has](#)

[its own dangers](#). While Land knew this very well and actually said so in his book, its title gives a wrong idea. It does, however, provide an interesting conjecture for [general systems theory](#):³ namely, that open systems tend to grow as they self-organize,⁴ and that the need for growth of some kind is a necessary feature of any open system that we are likely to find.

This conjecture that open systems have some intrinsic drive to grow may or may not stand up to testing but it has some plausibility, for social systems at least, because any human group must produce goods and services to sustain itself in existence, and any successful group is likely to produce a surplus which will have to be distributed and used or else disposed of somehow. Even if surplus produce is just destroyed or given away, as in a [religious sacrifice](#) or [potlatch ceremony](#), some social or spiritual values will have been served and augmented. Otherwise, the surplus must be spent or reinvested internally, or exported. It's likely that all these things will happen; and that some kind of growth will result no matter how the surplus is handled.

The values that a group pursues in the disposition of its produce, even its surplus produce, cannot be arbitrary – just ‘a matter of culture,’ as some might say. They will have some basis in the unique nature, composition and experience of this particular group, in human nature (whatever exactly this is), and in the logic of social interaction – the logic that we are trying to understand. In the end, though there is room for endless elaboration and combination, I can see just seven basic uses for a group's surplus, each a re-investment of some kind, by the group in its own future:

- A group may use its surplus to expand – to increase its population, resources and productive capacity.
- A group may also use its surplus to replicate, send forth a [colony](#) of itself, as single cells do when they fission, or as humans do (cooperatively) when they mate.
- As groups expand and replicate they enter into relationships with one another. Power, prestige and influence in these relationships becomes a third sector for investment.
- Group solidarity is yet another value on which surplus may be spent. Spectacular projects, festivities of all kinds, and attention-grabbing propaganda have been used for this purpose since ancient times.
- A group may choose to spend a portion of its surplus on various public goods that contribute to public safety or convenience – on any value not already mentioned.
- Most groups spend a good part of their surplus selectively to attract and keep the commitment of the members they desire – members who will bring it some return.

3 See this [summary of systems theory](#) by David Walonick.

4 See Section 5.1 and Appendix B.

- Finally, groups typically pay some members rather more than enough to live on, or motivate them to do their jobs. Indeed, the private gain of some elite group is often a primary purpose of the group's activities.⁵

To repeat the crucial point: Successful groups produce a surplus which will have to be spent somehow. Almost inevitably, the way that surplus is spent will bring some form of growth, and thus a greater surplus. For almost any successful group, a penchant for growth is in the nature of things. Growth is addictive too, because it acquires a certain momentum, and because cutbacks are always painful once growth has occurred.

Yet growth is also problematic in several ways: However advantageous it appears on the surface, it is likely to cause some dislocation too, because group structure is [not symmetric](#) with a change of scale. New concerns and lines of endeavour will be opened. Extra resources will have to be found, and extra waste disposed of. New competitors and enemies will have to be met somehow. And group solidarity will inevitably suffer as management becomes impersonal, and as distinctions of role and status grow steeper.

Taking the business firm as an example, it is well known that [growth poses new problems](#) both for management and for the product line. Arrangements that worked very well for a small business will not work as the firm grows to medium size. Arrangements that worked at medium size will break down as the firm gets really big. Profit margins may dwindle as the business grows, until the firm is running at a loss.

On a global scale, the side effects of growth are even more serious. Since medical advances cut mortality rates, the [world's population](#) has been rising exponentially. It was about one billion at the beginning of the 19th century. It hit two billion around 1927 and stands at something over seven billion today. It is expected to reach eight billion by 2025 and nine billion by 2043. These are not choices of any individual or government, but of the population and its society as a whole. To feed all these people and keep them employed, economic growth is needed and our global society is correspondingly addicted to growth. But the planet's ecosystem will not support indefinite growth forever. The political strains must eventually prove catastrophic, and are already doing so.

8.1.5 The Indulgence of Elites

In many groups large and small, there is a designated cadre or individual whose beliefs, desires and tastes have special import for the group as a whole. It might be 'the Tsar of all the Russias' or some other autocrat. It might be the infant in a family. It might be the graduates of certain elite universities, or members of a political party that is now in power. It might be those with notable piety, learning, courage, greed, perseverance, or any other rewarded trait. It might be the persons who already have conspicuous wealth or power or

⁵ See Section 8.1.5 below.

fame, or just the celebrities who are famous for being famous. In a complex society, it will be all of the above. Let us speak of these persons as aristocrats of the group; and let us speak of them collectively as an *elite* or *aristocracy*. Then we can say that groups tend to *indulge* their aristocracies, and collectively *desire* to do so until their status systems break down.

This motive of elite indulgence directs a group in the forming of its desires and goals. In circular fashion, it defines collective values for a group from the desires and values of persons who have been granted this special influence; and it sets up an invidious relationship between this indulged elite and the group's membership at large.

The motive works in several different ways: Most directly, the aristocracy is indulged with *obedience*, as ordinary people just follow instructions and do what they are told. It is indulged with loyalty, as obedience and all the other modes of indulgence are granted from habit and for long term self-interest, and not withdrawn for momentary advantage. It is indulged with the group's labor, organized to meet the needs and wishes of all such privileged persons, who are indulged too with esteem, respect, emulation, flattery – with all the emotional satisfactions appropriate to their special station.

The ways that aristocrats are indulged need not be codified. Up to a point, groups desire to indulge these special persons and they enjoy doing so. They may gain a needed sense of unity, identity or direction thereby, and other collective motives may be served, but this motive of elite indulgence is not just instrumental, but a collective value in its own right. While the reader may object that a marginalized, impoverished majority of group members values no such thing, it must be remembered that the marginalized have no effective voice (by definition) in their group's collective volition and decision process. Much as they may resent the group's indulgence of its aristocracy (while they themselves, perhaps, are starving), there is little they can do to influence the working dispensation: their group's distribution of its benefits and costs. For the completely marginal, what our group calls '[terrorism](#)' is their last political resort. Feeling ignored, offered the choice to perish gradually and quietly or in some abrupt, spectacular act of murder and destruction, the preference of many for the latter does not seem so irrational. Yet the group's decision to suppress and crush them further is even less so. Inevitably, groups are directed by the desires and tastes of their more privileged members – by those with an effective political voice, and especially by those with the wherewithal to pay for what they want. This is the case, not just in a market economy, but in any political system whatsoever.

Of course, desires for group survival, prosperity, stability and growth exist too in the general population – at least in some of it. To the extent that subgroups and individual members have any influence, their desires and wishes will be group desires as well – at least in some minor way. Conversely, to the extent that people cease to care about and invest in their group's functioning, solidarity is lost and the group begins to fall apart.

8.1.6 *Group Intentions*

After all this, I hope my readers will agree that human groups will have collective desires and intentions, and that these may sometimes conflict with vital needs of their member subgroups and individuals. Not all groups are alike. Specific cases require specific treatment. But we can see that groups, as such, are advantageously considered, as intentional open systems with definite interests and desires of their own. As entities of this kind they display certain properties – above all, a collective intentionality pointed, in all the ways discussed above, toward group survival, prosperity, stability, growth and the indulgence of its more influential members. In doing so, out of its need for working dispensation,⁶ it may act against the interests of many members. It will readily sacrifice members, or exploit and tyrannize a large number of them from collective motives of growth, stability, and the indulgence of elitist appetites for truth, beauty, leisure and comfort, when its peons are worked to death, without enough to eat, and with no prospects for their children except the same.

None of this allows us to predict what a group will do, still less what the outcomes of its choices will be. But it does help us to anticipate possibilities. In particular, it helps us to anticipate a progressive loss of solidarity from two adverse, inter-related trends that appear as a group overcomes its problems: the trends toward individualism and toward populism.

While a group is under stress for whatever reason, its members invest strongly in their groups, and pool their efforts to handle its common problems. Prowess and loyalty are at a premium. Rich individuality is not. As the group prevails against its various threats and challenges, civilization and individuality thrive, but only a relative few receive their benefits. Perhaps many people dress better, eat better and live longer. Perhaps advanced technology allows them to live more comfortably, and with the income to enjoy minor luxuries. But while the group now offers more scope for individual self-development, elite indulgence comes to the fore, and solidarity declines. [Populist](#) sentiments now emerge as people admire and trust their elites less while envying them more. When a people comes to feel that their group is now exploited and betrayed by its own leaders, a collapse of some kind is probably not far off.

8.2 **Context Pressures**

We shape our buildings; thereafter, they shape us.
- Winston Churchill

Groups have their mindsets, as we've seen, and function by translating the suggestions they collectively receive into suggestions to their individual members. In some emergency, for example, the army and police may be deployed, reserves called up, volunteers recruited and assigned. In that event, the hurricane, or earthquake or invasion acted as a stimulus to the group as a whole,

⁶ Discussed in Section 3.3.3.

which in turn made collective decisions as to the use of its resources. As we'll take up in the next chapter, these collective decisions will often have large consequences for many individual lives.

For the present, however, we are concerned with the group's capability to direct its members in this way, and to exert such context pressures on them. Note that here and elsewhere I am avoiding the word '*control*' because the members are not robots or puppets. They remain autonomous beings who '*control*' themselves, to whatever extent they aren't merely driven by their impulses. But they are certain prompted, guided or directed by their groups, whose sanctions they wish to avoid. Accordingly, they respond, along some line of their own choosing, to context pressures (and specific suggestions) which the group exerts. To discuss these pressures, let's begin with a brief review:

- 1) The group is an open system requiring inputs of energy and raw materials, just as its members do, but on a larger scale, which depends partly on its population, partly on its members' expectations, partly on the maintenance costs of its existing facilities, and partly on the costs of any novel enterprises – e.g. a military venture, a transcontinental railroad, a satellite and space program, etc.
- 2) Groups evolve and maintain collective mindsets, roughly analogous to those of their individual members. The group mindset holds that bevy of individuals together as a working (hopefully viable) group and subserves that group's vital functions in doing so.
- 3) The collective minding of a group emerges from the interactions of its members – and of that group as a whole with other groups – as the outcome of a political thought process, as shaped by its existing mindset. Groups, of course, are influenced by their leaders, by their governing institutions and their political elite but, at the same time, they exert collective influences of their own. They put constraints upon their would-be rulers, if only by figuring in their plans and calculations.
- 4) Through its minding process, the group builds and maintains physical facilities, working relationships and (what we've called) a '*working dispensation*' through which its members are sustained and requited for their efforts. Of course, this dispensation finds some people much more essential and profitable than others, and treats some much better than others. It manages its members, all of them, in its collective interest.

8.2.1 How Groups Manage Their Members

Society and its groups shape, guide and manage their members in at least three basic ways which have already been introduced and discussed to some extent. By accepting these influences and/or reacting against them, we become the individuals that we are.

- 1) To begin with, we find ourselves embedded in a material environment or milieu which was always already there when we were born, and which

changes over the course of our lives. This milieu includes not just the natural habitat but all stigmergic markings made upon this: including buildings, tools, infrastructure, and every type of artifact. It includes books and street signs and advertising posters – a thick structure of detailed stigmergic promptings. From the moment we are born, we are surrounded by *things* and by the suggestions they convey.

2) Apart from these stigmergic prompts, we receive suggestions from other people through the available means of communication.⁷ Through peer-to-peer communication we make friends and influence people, and in turn are influenced by them. Through command-and-threat communication, those with power tell us what to do, and thereby make use of us in various ways. With broadcast communication, teachers give classes, politicians make speeches and business firms peddle their merchandise. In all these ways, other people influence and prompt us to be and to conduct ourselves to their liking. Social living as such has a certain context logic which prompts its individuals toward conventional and mutually respectful behavior.

3) The society and its groups also draw us into various 'games' – social relationships with payoffs and rules of interaction. Some of these games are compulsory for almost everyone. Others are contingently compulsory for persons of a certain kind. Still others are optional but made seductively attractive e.g. through advertising. In any case, the games we play – have been somehow induced or compelled to play – will suggest desires and values and beliefs, and will enforce these by penalizing players who do not accept them, or by placing these at some disadvantage relative to those who do. In this way, the school-child learns to behave like a pupil, the soldier like a soldier, the politician like a politician. Almost automatically, we become what we are trying to be good at. A game both selects potential players equipped to play it, and then shapes those who 'hang in there' into competent, acceptable players.

Finally, as an important special case, your groups make use of us in various ways. They assign us to definite roles and responsibilities, and thereby invite us to believe, that our lives have certain meanings – as doctor, plumber, parent, suicide bomber . . . whatever. In this way, they contribute to our identities and sometimes take them over completely. In giving our lives such meanings, a group not only uses us for its purposes, but persuades us to see ourselves – define ourselves – as instruments of its purpose and volition.

As we grow up and come to adulthood, we either adapt directly to these influences or we react against them in some way. In doing so, we become the individuals that we are, with the identities that we project and maintain.

8.3 The World Mind Today

Perhaps everything terrible is in its deepest being something helpless that wants help from us.

- Rainer Maria Rilke

⁷ On the four basic modes of communication, see Section 1.1.2.

If we accept that human society has a mind of sorts, then we must ask what today's world – now a single global society, not yet a single civilization – is thinking. If we agree that the politics of a group is a thought process – not just metaphorically, but in a sense that's closely analogous to our own thinking – then it is not hard to list some main issues that it is thinking *about*. And though we can't predict, we have a chance to anticipate certain conclusions that it might draw. I will discuss just five issues now demon-strably on the global mind. Three of them are well-known and much-discussed by now. Two of them are rather less so. Taken together, they may serve to illustrate the approach of Section 7.2: to seek understanding of a group mind through a study of the issues on its plate.

8.3.1 *Injustice and Toxic Shame*

A first issue stems from the five-hundred-year-old legacy of a modernity based on Western imperialist and capitalist exploitation: the [massive inequality](#); the feelings of envy, resentment and toxic shame, combined with feelings of entitlement in the rich Western countries; the political and economic institutions which pay some people very well, but scarcely enough to live on (if even that) to many others. How will this legacy be overcome? How will its social damage and its wounds be healed? Undeniably this is an issue which meets the definition of Section 7.2.3: it overflows and baffles all existing institutions of governance, and cannot possibly be resolved without conflict.

First, as a call for reform, it raises the central question that all such calls must raise: "Which reform, at whose expense?" Even the worst, most abusive working dispensation has the advantage of being a *fait accompli*. There is just one of it, and it has reality on its side. Proposed reforms come from all directions; and no proposal can become actual unless, through some political process, all of its rivals are eliminated. There can be no reform at all without political conflict, not just against the *status quo*, but amongst the alternative proposals. And this conflict will be a bitter and divisive one, because each proposed reform must come at somebody's expense, and will have its own set of winners and losers – the prime losers, of course, being a strong, already organized faction that benefits from the existing arrangements. That is the handicap every reform movement must face, before it can actually reform something.

Conceptually, reforms always seem fairly easy. In principle, a just reform could be negotiated by any legislature or focus group, operating behind a [veil of ignorance](#) which stripped away all knowledge of the capabilities and special interest of each participant, while leaving them fully knowledgeable about external circumstances. Debating social safety nets, for example, participants would not know whether they were wealthy or impoverished, remuneratively employed or not, or living in a rich country or a poor one. They would have to choose some compromise that all could live with. In practice, however, their own interests and capabilities are what negotiating parties

know more vividly than anything else. They can pretend, and even sincerely attempt to put their personal stakes aside; but they will never be fully able to do this.

Today, modernity's legacy of imperialism, capitalism, and more than 300 years of Western domination are clearly on the world's agenda; and there is no knowing what it will make of them, and what the outcome will be. One thing we can see clearly is that the institutions which currently exist are failing to cope with choices which must now be made.

8.3.2 *The Environment*

A second issue on the global agenda can be summed up as 'degradation of the environment' – depletion of resources and measureable deterioration of the planetary ecosystem on which human society depends. This includes not just [global warming](#), but all phenomena of the so-called [anthropocene](#) age – the geological epoch that began when human activities began to have significant impact on the Earth's geology and [ecosystems](#). The demands of human society with its voracious economy now exceed the carrying capacity of the [global ecosphere](#). The phrase '[sustainable development](#)' is little more than a soothing political slogan. It may be an oxymoron. The fact is that for ten thousand years now, at least since the beginnings of sedentism and agriculture, economic development has been challenging and changing the natural environment with ever-increasing intensity; and we are probably close to a [tipping point](#)⁸, at which this long trend collapses. At least since 1962, the year of Rachel Carson's book, *Silent Spring*, the fundamental contradiction between economy and ecology has been on the planet's cognitive agenda. The global society remains largely in denial on this issue, but is vexed by it nonetheless.

8.3.3 *The Culture War*

I speak of this third issue as '[the culture war](#),' though it is not really a single issue, but a tangle of related conflicts on at least half-a-dozen ones. [Abortion](#), [gun control](#), [immigration](#), [homosexuality](#), [separation of church and state](#), and the [impact of modern science](#) on traditional and religious world views are just the start of a long list, visibly inter-connected by a single variable: the level of discomfort that people feel in their exposure to mindsets different from their own.

Not that this is the only variable in play. The political choices are inter-linked, but can still be made independently of one another. For example, it is perfectly possible to be pro-choice, but against gun control legislation; or to be a religious Darwinist, or a homosexual Catholic. The culture war issues really are separate questions, each cleaving the population in its own distinctive way between those who do and do not want change – and between those who do and do not wish to limit the freedom of others to "go to hell in their own way." And yet there is the correlation, that Jonathan Haidt and the [moral](#)

⁸ See the [referenced paper](#).

[foundations](#) theorists have pointed out: [Progressives](#) are especially concerned with the moral sentiments of Care and Fairness; [Conservatives](#) with the sentiments of Loyalty, Authority and Purity; [Libertarians](#) with their wish for freedom, and their loathing of external constraint. What I am broadly calling the 'culture war issue' might be seen as this three-way division in the [body politic](#).

But the real venom in this division seems to spring from the anxiety that many people feel in the presence of other persons different from themselves – or from their related fear that comfortably familiar ideas, customs and cultures are under stress and changing. The bottom-line, I suppose is that many people feel quite comfortable in an open, pluralist, rapidly changing society, while many others feel deeply threatened by the influx of alien products, ideas and peoples. They feel a need to hold what lives around them to a certain standard of homogeneity. They cannot feel safe or comfortable when many people around them are very different from themselves.

In today's [diasporan society](#), where nearly all of the large ethnic groups have been scattered around the world by civil conflicts or population pressure, what follows is a culture war between [nativists](#) and [multi-culturalists](#) – between those who demand a certain level of ethnic purity in their surroundings, and 'alien' others whom they would assimilate, deport or kill. These conflicts are made still more intense by a tight job market, and by the challenge to traditional identities and cultures from modern science. These factors are not unrelated. From science has come a new technology which at least [displaces human labor](#), where it does not eliminate demand for it outright.

From science too have come several ideas which challenge not just the traditional religions, but "common sense" itself. Most churches have long since made their peace with modern astronomy – that neither the Earth nor the Sun, nor even our whole galaxy, are at the center of the universe. Relativity theory and quantum mechanics defy what we perceive with our senses, but are too abstruse to have much impact on the popular culture. But Darwinian biology is still unacceptable to millions of people, while the impact of neuroscience – the premise of this book that mind and 'soul' are abstract byproducts of what our brains, bodies and human groups are doing – is just beginning to be felt.

For all these reasons, 'identity politics' is inflamed everywhere today, and the simple solution – just to live, let live, and discuss our differences civilly – seems out of reach.

8.3.4 Liberal Modernity

As a global system, liberal modernity is less an established fact than many take for granted. It has [enemies even at its core](#) – in the United States, Britain and Western Europe.⁹ Whether it has some more desirable alternative remains to be seen. The global issue that it poses is unfamiliar to most North American and European persons – at least, to those from a background similar to

⁹ Amply demonstrated, as of 2016, by the Brexit vote and the election of Donald Trump as US president.

mine. It was called to my attention last year by a paper, [Islam, Reason and the Challenge of Decaying Modernity](#), published in 2015 by Prof. Muqtedar Khan, a Muslim, an academic and a public intellectual, which does a good job of explaining the antipathy of Islam to Western liberalism and the modernity it made. This antipathy, and the issue I have in mind, arises from a paradox of liberalism which has been central for the Western mindset, and now increasingly for the world at large. It was first pointed out by Bernard Mandeville in the first decade of the 18th century, in a notorious poem and essay, [The Fable of the Bees](#), which pointed out that private vices can be bring public benefits. This idea seemed paradoxical and outrageous at first, even to [mercantilist](#) English-men, but it became respectable seventy years later, when Adam Smith expanded on its thesis in [The Wealth of Nations](#), the foundational work for capitalism and modern economics.

If private vices (notably acquisitiveness and heterodox thought) bring public benefits, then society will do well to recognize a *right to be greedy and selfish* and, more generally, a *right to be wrong*. In general, Western Europe and the US have followed this path, and greatly profited from doing so.¹⁰ However, Mandeville's paradox, and the right to be wrong are still anathema to religious fundamentalists and traditionalists of all stripes – for rather obvious reasons. Many Muslims especially feel that this supposed right is downright evil, and even Satanic; and their view is understandable if one bears in mind that [Muhammad](#) was a political and military leader, not just a religious one, and that the religion he established claims to be God's final revelation, and thus an ultimate reconciliation of the real with the ideal. But you don't need to be Muslim to have difficulty with Mandeville's paradox. Plenty of Jews and Christians (not to mention the non-Abrahamic religions) would reject it as well.

But this is not so easy to do. For one thing, it's intimately bound up with the autonomous 'pursuit of happiness,' which few North Americans, or Europeans, or people anywhere, are inclined to surrender. For another, it's inconsistent with certain supposed 'rights' (like freedom of speech and worship) which have become habitual and central for our whole concept of modern society. If you seriously oppose the right to be wrong, then you must believe that a single truth is known to those who make the laws, and must urge some type of inquisition, to avoid unacceptable pollution of the collective mindset.

It's hard for Western people to accept that liberal modernity is in serious question these days, beyond some tinkering adjustments that are obviously needed. That its whole worldview is rejected by literally *billions* of people is scarcely thinkable – if only because they have nothing very appealing – perhaps, not even feasible now – to put in its place. Yet this is the fact.

10 Niall Ferguson offers an excellent discussion of the sources of European ascendancy in his book (of 2011), [Civilization: The West and the Rest](#). See [Donald Kagan's review](#) in the New York Times.

8.3.5 Global Governance

. . . Till the war-drum throb'd no longer, and the battle-flags were furl'd/ In the Parliament of man, the Federation of the world./There the common sense of most shall hold a fretful realm in awe,/And the kindly earth shall slumber, lapt in universal law.

- Tennyson, [Locksley Hall](#) (1835)

In speaking of global governance, I do **not** mean a single government for the planet as a whole. I am **not** thinking, necessarily, of a 'Parliament of Man' along the often quoted lines of Tennyson's poem. I doubt that such a global legislature will be feasible any time soon. But we already have an extensive network of global governance – beginning with the United Nations, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization and the Internet, to name a few key institutions. We will undoubtedly have more effective institutions in the future. The best I can do here is just to mention a few of the problems that such bodies must address, and speculate a little on the form they might take.

In my view, the central issue in global governance today stems from the manifest incompetence of current political institutions to address the issues on their collective plate. I believe this incompetence is widely perceived, by many people everywhere today. While the perception takes varied forms, and is articulated and explained differently by people of different political complexions, there are some obvious reasons why a crisis of governance has developed.

Here, as food for thought, I want to mention four conditions that global governance in the 21st century will somehow have to meet:

- The world society will need a much higher degree of [political trust](#) than we see at present between the city and its countryside, and between its leaders and the led. Without such trust, *and trustworthiness*, the rising tides of [populism](#) that we are seeing everywhere will end by making society ungovernable.
- It will need a much higher degree of cooperation than we see at present amongst its separate political units. If peace is to be kept, the jealous, mutually suspicious [sovereignty](#) of these 'states' must be subdued or tempered somehow within some over-arching [confederal system](#) in which people feel *safe* – secure that their vital needs will not be threatened.
- A truly global economy will need run on some form of [blended capitalism](#) in which private and public interests are weighed together and reconciled, much more closely than we see at present.
- Finally, our methods of [parenting](#), [socializing](#) and [educating](#) must be revised, to exploit the new technologies of communication and information processing, and to accommodate more closely the personal needs of individual children and adults. With current information technology, there is no longer a good reason to teach people by stuffing them into classrooms and lecturing to them, and by selling them glossy expens-

ive textbooks. Institutions of inexpensive, convenient and [customized education](#) could be devised though which students would learn by accessing the Web, doing 'homework' (by themselves or in small groups), meeting together (either virtually or face-to-face) for small-group discussion, and then being tested and certified as needed.

Withal, it's obvious to everyone now that the governance which rules them is becoming more oppressive and incompetent with every passing year, while its real authority – the respect and trust of its citizens – grows ever shabbier and more threadbare. Anderson's children's story of [The Emperor's New Clothes](#), first published in 1837, is still the key political fable of our time.

8.4 Political Murder (Democide) and Human Self-defense

Primarily [anarchism] is a tendency that is suspicious and skeptical of domination, authority, and hierarchy. It seeks structures of hierarchy and domination in human life over the whole range, extending from, say, patriarchal families to, say, imperial systems, and it asks whether those systems are justified. It assumes that the burden of proof for anyone in a position of power and authority lies on them. Their authority is not self-justifying.

– Noam Chomsky

Accepting that a group or nation or whole society may have interests of its own, apart from those of its human members, we face the possibility – indeed, a likelihood – of serious abuse. In their pursuit of rental income nations threaten each other and sometimes go to war. In their pursuit of working dispensation, powerful sub-groups (social classes) form political factions to exploit and persecute some victims unable to defend themselves. Thus political parties and churches conduct purges and inquisitions. Thus nation-states have been known to kill millions of their subjects.

To see what good reason we have to be suspicious of authority and government, check out R.J. Rummel's book on (what he calls) [democide](#):¹¹ wholesale murder intentionally committed by governments, either through mass execution or culpable neglect. His formal definition of the term is complicated, but that is the gist of it. Rummel *excludes* military casualties (even collateral ones), actions taken against armed civilians during mob action or a riot, and executions for what are internationally considered capital crimes (so long as evidence does not exist that the charges were just invented by a government to justify an execution. The list of 20th century examples will include:

- Stalin's [Great Purge](#) in the Soviet Union;
- deaths from famine in Mao Zedong's [Great Leap Forward](#);
- [murders by the Khmer Rouge](#) in Cambodia, in pursuit of a purely agrarian society;
- the [Rwandan genocide](#), mostly of Tutsis and some moderate Hutus;
- the [Armenian Genocide](#) by the Ottoman Turkish government;
- deaths resulting from Belgium's [colonial policy in the Congo Free](#)

11 [Death By Government](#), R.J. Rummel (1994)

- [State](#); and
- the systematic [Nazi extermination](#) of Jews, Poles, Russians, homosexuals, trade unionists, and various other groups.

Rummel's research estimates that there have been around 262 million victims of democide in the century just ended – more than a quarter of a billion people, and six times as many as have died in battle. But even these appalling statistics understate the question I wish to raise: the defense of men and women as individuals against toxic groups and governments – because murder is only the extreme of what nasty groups and governments commonly do to people. It will be clear that the question of human self-defense against toxic groups and governments is not a small one.

* * * * *

After mentioning Rummel's work, it seems appropriate to end this chapter with a declaration of my own politics. I know that the human capability to come together in groups is one of our great strengths as a species, and that groups of many kinds make vital contributions to human welfare. At the same time, I am deeply fearful of the capacity for stupidity and evil by organizations comprised of humans as we are. Though I agree with Gandhi that Western civilization, and still more a global one, [would be a good idea](#) if we had one, I am fearful of the concentrated power that will be needed to create working dispensation – smoothly functioning social order – on a global scale.

I believe, as this book has been arguing, that to a large extent we are trained and lived through by the groups we belong to – especially by groups which we depend upon for welfare and happiness, or those in whose service we subsist and desire to rise. This ineluctable sociality is a central feature of human biology, and I would have it no other way. But at the same time, I am aware that our groups use us for their own purposes, which are not always consistent with our human needs and rights. I fear that groups, especially the large, impersonal ones, are very likely to regard their members with instrumental ruthlessness – as expendable components to be used – used up when necessary, and then replaced as promptly as possible. We have good reason to fear and loathe such such groups, and stay away from them to the limited extent that this is possible. But I know that clannish tribal politics can be even worse.

I understand that we need states and large business firms to organize human cooperation on the large scale that modernity requires. But we have good reason to be wary of all such organizations, and we are fully justified in prizing and defending our own lives against them. I cannot call myself an anarchist. I do not see how a complex society, could survive without governance – indeed, without much more and better governance than we can see at present. Yet I agree with Chomsky that the burden of proof must always be on authority to demonstrate its legitimacy and service to the public, and that forms of

domination should be challenged and modified or dismantled if that burden cannot be met. For that matter, James Madison had already said as much in Federalist #51: "In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself." Render it accountable, that is to say, under Chomsky's 'burden of proof.'

How should I label myself politically? Where [fascists](#) (under the neutral and technical definition of that word) value the group above the individual, and use some group – typically, the nation-state – to anchor their personal identities, I would do just the opposite: I would like to be a loyal, contributing citizen of a humane state that capably serves its people's interests in a globally responsible manner. I was fortunate to become a citizen of Canada, which comes pretty close but isn't perfect.¹²

I don't find a word for my political type – for persons who find the meanings of their lives within themselves, develop their own identities accordingly, and want the state, and other groups as well, to further individual lives and their possibilities while avoiding doing harm. We might be called political humanists, I suppose.

12 On how this happened, see my thumbnail autobiography in Appendix D.