
The Dangers of Oligarchy

From Civilization to Manipulation: The Discrediting and Replacement of the Western Elite

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Civilization stands or falls with those who set the tone in society. Are they proper models for emulation? Do they inspire others to realize their better selves, or are they schemers manipulating others for their own benefit? Increasingly, those who set the long-term direction of America and the Western world exhibit personality traits and goals that were once scorned as incompatible with a humane existence. They are creating a society very different from that previously understood as civilized. Many of them are politicians, but for the most part politicians act out the predispositions of the larger culture, which are created by those who capture the mind and the imagination and give people their sense of what life is like and what it ought to become. For a very long time the general trends in Western society have been away from the notion of what makes life worth living that emerged from the classical and Christian heritage and gave shape to Western civilization. Those trends have moved into positions of great influence people whom the elites of an earlier society would have resisted and sought to

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refute. The purpose of this article is to examine an important part of this change and explain how and why it occurred.

“Civilization” is a term of many meanings. It refers here to all of those activities—religious, moral, intellectual, artistic, and political—through which human life is made better, more deeply satisfying, than it might otherwise be. Civilization ennobles human beings, refines their sensibilities and conduct. It fosters the kind of orientation of will, imagination and reason that realizes man’s higher humanity. One of the most important fruits of civilization can be summed up in the word “civility.” Civilized human beings treat each other as respected partners in a life that matters.

The Well-Rounded Aristocrat

All great civilizations assume that humans are divided beings. They have a capacity for goodness, truth and beauty, but these are always threatened by an at least equal potential for evil, falsehood and ugliness. Only through protracted and often difficult effort to shape self can the higher end be advanced. If societies fail in this task and lose their civilized and civilizing achievements, human beings can turn into something much worse than animals, into devils. To be human is to be not confined, the way animals are for the most part, to instinctual drives. It is to be able to assess the present critically, imagine alternatives, have a choice. At their worst, men can invent intricate schemes for indulging their greed, cruelty or desire for power. They can subject others to horrendous tyranny. A basic purpose of civilization is to protect man from himself. Civilization reins in the less admirable traits of human nature. It mitigates social tension and induces a sense of common purpose. It inspires good conduct—everything from moral integrity to good manners, two traits that are more closely related than many think. In the civilized society, upbringing, education and the general culture help convey the possibility of a life worth living for its own sake.

Crucial to the health of any society are its gatekeepers. In different walks of life and at different levels they embody and enforce the norms of civilization whether as parents, teachers, priests, master craftsmen, or statesmen. They praise and encourage, but also condemn and censure. They let some pass and hold others back. At their best, gatekeepers are not rigid and formalistic. They understand that the spirit of civilization cannot be captured once

*Gatekeepers
crucial to
the health
of society.*

and for all in precise, unchanging rules. This spirit needs creativity, flexibility and fresh blood.

Even less-than-civilized societies have their gatekeepers; only they are not a humanizing force. They, too, praise and censure, but in behalf of inferior objectives. Societies claiming to champion equality are no less discriminatory than aristocratic ones, may, indeed, be not only disrespectful of true distinction but also more severe and intolerant in their disapprovals. Edmund Burke wrote: "Those who attempt to level, never equalize. In all societies, consisting of various descriptions of citizens, some description must be uppermost. The levelers, therefore, only change and pervert the natural order of things; they load the edifice of society by setting up in the air what the solidity of the structure requires to be on the ground."¹ When the wrong people get to set the tone, the often fragile structures of civilization begin to crumble.

In as much as some human beings will always exercise authority over others, the quality of leadership is for civilization the central question. A strong consensus emerged early in the Western world that authority should as far as possible be exercised by persons of high culture who exhibited virtue and wisdom. The Greek word for such persons was *aristoi*, the best. Plato and Aristotle paid close attention to the discipline through which the character traits of such individuals were acquired. The members of this natural aristocracy were able, Aristotle argued, to rise above merely personal or other partisan advantage to a genuine concern for the good of the whole. They could achieve true friendship with people similarly inclined. Their nobility of character made possible a partnership in the intrinsically valuable life of the good, the true and the beautiful, whose excellence was exceeded only by the purely contemplative life. Men were prepared for and confirmed in the higher life through *scholē*, leisure, not in the current sense of having free time and nothing in particular to do, but in the sense of actively cultivating the higher human qualities—in morality, the arts, philosophy, politics. Aristocrats stood in sharp contrast to self-serving persons of narrow range and undeveloped sensibility.

We trace back to the ancient Greeks the old Western belief that education and society in general should foster a well-rounded personality, one integrated and made proportionate by the wish to

*Virtue and
wisdom
qualifications
for leadership.*

¹ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 43.

realize life's highest, most deeply satisfying values. This is the context for Aristotle's strong defense of private property. Having material assets, he argued, is a desirable, even indispensable, means to the good life. It liberates men to some extent for the activities that define their highest nature.

But cooperation is possible, Aristotle pointed out, that is not rooted in respect for the higher purposes of human existence. It can be simply for profit or pleasure. Agreements made for those purposes do not require of the partners moral character and a well-rounded personality, only enlightened self-interest. They can be concluded even by bad men who see an advantage to themselves. Because attached to no higher and enduring purpose, alliances of that type are inherently fragile. They dissolve with the advantage to any of the partners. Societies that are held together by such merely selfish calculation are destructive of the higher life and inherently unstable. They disintegrate when the moral and cultural capital inherited from a better society runs out and flagrant partisanship and exploitation produce social conflict.

*Oligarchy
disdained.*

Since the ancient Greeks, Western civilization has been strongly prejudiced against people of blatantly partisan motives and narrow range. Plato and Aristotle agreed that people are unsuited for leadership in proportion to their having motives that undermine the higher life and the common good. The worst possible regime is tyranny, rule by a single bad individual for his own benefit. Almost as bad is what Plato and Aristotle called "democracy," by which they meant not a form of constitutional, representative government but rule by the majority according to its partisan desires of the moment. "Democracy" is dominated by self-serving demagogues. It is morally akin to and usually followed by tyranny. A third regime that has been scorned in the Western world since Plato and Aristotle is "oligarchy," rule by the rich in their own interest. Devoid of the discipline of the higher life, the oligarchs exercise only such self-control as is needed to remain in power and acquire more wealth.

Though it always defended private property as a means to the higher ends of society, Western civilization had a strong bias against a single-minded pursuit of wealth and a related manipulation of others. The greed and narrowness of "oligarchy" was seen as destructive of the good society. Money people had to be reined in and put in their place. In fact, the less said about money and

economic matters, the better. To this day, money is a somewhat embarrassing subject among gentlemen, which may be another way of saying that gentlemen are less common than they used to be.

According to Christianity, those with great wealth had greater responsibilities than others. Property owners should use their resources in a way pleasing to God and consider themselves stewards of assets that were entrusted to them only temporarily. For a long time and in most places Christianity would not even approve the charging of interest.

Though some level of wealth is indispensable to civilization, creating it should not be the primary concern of those setting the tone in society. People with real authority should be somewhat above such matters. Western society signaled in various ways that, in the end, certain non-economic pursuits are more important to the health of society than production and moneymaking. The non-material higher purposes of human existence were most conspicuously represented by contemplatives and priests, but others in a position to lead were also expected to uphold non-utilitarian values like charity, chivalry, civility, justice, honesty, mercy, courage, moderation, and elegance. Life was to be humanized and refined as far as possible: through religious discipline, moral character, education, and manners. With people of virtue and wisdom as gatekeepers, society could maintain a proper sense of direction and proportion.

Non-economic pursuits define higher life.

For centuries, representatives of the church and the aristocracy, whether natural or titled, could command the deference of bankers and businessmen. To gain any kind of acceptance in the church or the upper classes those engaged in moneymaking had to please their social superiors by adapting to their norms, at least in appearance. They had to acquire some of the polish and above-it-all demeanor of their betters. New money, in particular, was on probation. To this day, even oligarchic marauders try to buy respectability by donating to museums, symphonies and other charitable purposes. It used to be said that it takes at least three generations for a newly rich family to ascend to something like aristocratic poise and refinement and hence to social prominence. Sometimes those aspiring to advancement had to contend with the harsh arrogance and snobbery of gatekeepers. This was the back side of the vetting and discrimination that established and sustained a hi-

erarchy of values and a corresponding social pecking-order. Thus were men of finance and commerce integrated into the civilizing structures of society.

The Rise of Oligarchy

It hardly needs saying that Western civilization often honored its standards in the breach. The people who were supposed to be held back—such as persons exhibiting obvious avarice and an inordinate desire for power—were often able to get around the discipline and institutions of civilization. The power of wealth being considerable to begin with, kings and aristocrats desperate to finance wars or prop up their estates often became indebted to the big-money men. More or less reluctant alliances of this kind sometimes gave oligarchs great influence, making it possible for them to manipulate governments into doing their bidding. Oligarchy became dressed up as monarchy or aristocracy. The heyday of British imperialism comes to mind. Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) complained in the early 1800s: “The stock-jobbing and moneyed interest is so strong in this country, that it has more than once prevailed in our foreign councils over national honor and national justice.”²

Locke
prefigures
utilitarianism.

No single cause explains how the old hierarchy of value was eroded by the ethos of oligarchy. An important *philosophical* change, which prefigured and inspired practical change, can be studied in an early liberal figure like John Locke, whose empiricism and rationalism are but aspects of the relevant intellectual transformation. In the *Second Treatise of Civil Government* one learns to question an earlier standard of human good and to identify with a new hero. The man put on display in Locke’s state of nature is no aristocratic idler or contemplative monk or scholar. He is a diligent maker and doer. He is busy, “mixing” his labor with things found in nature and acquiring a private title to them. God, Locke wrote, gave the world “to the use of the industrious and rational, (and labour was to be his title to it . . .).”³ Intentionally or not, Locke

² S. T. Coleridge, *Table Talk: Recorded by Henry Nelson Coleridge (and John Taylor Coleridge)*, ed. Carl Woodring, vol. 14, bk. 2 of *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn (London and Princeton: Routledge and Princeton University Press, 1990), 112.

³ John Locke, *Second Treatise of Civil Government* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980), § 34, 22.

held up self-made men for emulation. He was, in effect, the champion of the entrepreneur. He propounded a labor theory of value. Things become valuable in proportion to the amount of work expended on them. This idea was later taken up by Karl Marx, who asserted that only working men produce any value. By suggesting that the human essence is found in practical economic activity Locke set thinking on a more utilitarian and materialistic course. In *The Liberal Tradition in America* Louis Hartz greatly exaggerated Locke's influence on the founding of America but also contributed to the transformation of America's constitutional tradition by stressing the side of Locke that was most conducive to the money interest.

But since the ancient Greeks the idea had been prominent in the West that civilization depends for its health on having plenty of people who are able to go beyond and *above* economic activity to pursue goodness, truth and beauty. Many whose main claim to stature was moral, contemplative and cultural were beneficiaries of inherited wealth or of the economic support of others. Readers of Locke must infer that such men should be demoted in favor of energetic producers. By implication, he challenged the classical Western education and taste, which assumed non-utilitarian conceptions of morality, philosophy, and the arts. Locke disparaged the old idea of leisure, turning, specifically, against a major element of traditional culture—poetry. The latter should be discouraged in a real man. “Methinks the parents should labor to have [the poetic vein] stifled, and suppressed, as much as may be: And I know not what Reason a Father can have, to wish his son a Poet, who does not desire to have him bid Defiance to all other Callings, and Business. . . . [T]here are very few Instances of those, who have added to their patrimony by any thing they have reaped from thence. Poetry and Gaming, which usually go together, are alike in this too, That they seldom bring any Advantage.”⁴

*Locke
redefined
work and
property.*

No subject is dearer to Locke than safe-guarding private property, but he views that institution in a new way. He is one of the first to begin separating property and economic activity from traditional civilizing structures and aspirations. Increasingly property becomes defined in strictly economic terms rather than with reference to its historically evolved moral-spiritual, social and cultural functions. By extricating property from this traditional setting Locke and other philosophers assisted the process whereby

⁴ John Locke, *Thoughts on Education*, §174, 284.

*Well-rounded
gentleman
yields to
entrepreneurs
and financiers.*

entrepreneurs and financiers were freed from old moral and cultural constraints and biases. Locke's attenuated Christianity, his empiricism, rationalism and strong puritan and utilitarian leanings helped create the intellectual and political momentum that undermined the old sense of priorities and particularly the notion that property and production should be means to higher ends. The spreading utilitarian and oligarchic mentality would soon throw off what remained of Locke's Christian sensibility.

A century and half later Coleridge decried avarice in his country. He complained about "the **OVERBALANCE OF THE COMMERCIAL SPIRIT IN CONSEQUENCE OF THE ABSENCE OR WEAKNESS OF THE COUNTER-WEIGHTS.**" Commerce was necessary, but unseemly money-grubbing, stock-jobbing, speculation and predatory business practices signified a disturbing decline of civilized restraint. Spiritual, moral and other culture were retreating. Coleridge bemoaned "the general neglect of all the austerer studies; the long and ominous eclipse of Philosophy; the usurpation of that venerable name by physical and psychological Empiricism; and the non-existence of a learned and philosophic Public."⁵ Coleridge believed that society needed the leadership of gentlemen and of the priests, scholars and teachers whom he called "the clerisy." They represented the higher purposes of society.

But Coleridge and what he defended were already losing to the spirit of big finance and commerce. Western man was rearranging his priorities. The society structured to protect the higher values of civilization and the common good was under growing pressure from economic forces that were also increasingly unencumbered by traditional restraints. Well-rounded gentlemen had to yield to single-minded and often less than scrupulous financiers and industrialists.

The advance of economism and oligarchy could be read even on the landscape. In the traditional societies of the West the churches stood out, in the center of the community, expressing a certain sense of priority and proportion. But in the Manhattan skyline, for example, you see embodied a wholly different notion of what matters most. The churches cower in the shadows of much

⁵ S. T. Coleridge, *Lay Sermons* (Second Sermon), ed. R. J. White, Vol. 6 of *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn (London and Princeton: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd and Princeton University Press, 1972), 169 (capitalization in original), 170.

greater and wholly different buildings. To stay alive, some churches have sold the air space above them to the builders of towering commercial cathedrals.

Rationalism

Western society slowly shifted its attention from the inner, spiritual-moral struggle previously seen as the crux of human existence towards schemes for economic enrichment and improvement of the social exterior. Philosophy and education—previously centered on the need to elevate life morally, culturally and intellectually—became increasingly utilitarian and scientific. Knowledge became viewed more and more as an instrument for manipulating reality for utilitarian purposes. The growing emphasis on technology reflected a shift in thinking about how human existence could best be enhanced. Materialism and rationalism of various types, eventually often closely allied with sentimental utopianism, fostered the notion that human existence could be vastly improved by cleverly remaking society. John Stuart Mill, who was at once a sentimental dreamer and a rationalist, asserted that tradition was ever the great obstacle to human progress. Enlightened men should take charge. The liberal era, during which intellectuals like Mill could attack the old notions of human excellence, was followed, as Mill himself wished, by an era of social engineering and mobilization of the state. In 1947 C. S. Lewis wrote of the future in his *The Abolition of Man*: “The man-moulders of the new age will be armed with the powers of an omniscient state and an irresistible scientific technique: we shall get at last a race of conditioners who really can cut out all posterity in whatever shape they please.”⁶

Rationalism allied with sentimental utopianism.

The unleashing of economic and other utilitarian activity from moral and other restrictions was both preceded and accompanied by a far-reaching redefinition of human reason. Whether in classical Greece or in Christianity, the highest form of reason was assumed to be indistinguishable from a well-rounded personality and sound character. A true philosopher was one whose entire being was oriented towards the higher life. He could assess aspects of human existence in relation to intimations of what will satisfy mankind’s deepest longings. Wisdom was rooted in concrete experience of the higher life.

⁶ C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1947), 73.

*Rationalism
conducive to
manipulation.*

The new rationality, coming to early fruition in the Enlightenment, was by its very nature tin-eared with regard to the distinctively human sphere. Rationalism modeled itself largely on modern science. It assumed an essentially materialistic view of nature and wanted to study man in much the same way as astronomy studied the mechanical laws governing planets and stars. Rationalism deliberately looked away from questions about life's meaning and purpose that had previously been considered crucial. Its domain was to solve abstract problems, collect and organize so-called empirical evidence, and apply the principles of experimental science to the manipulation of phenomena. Real knowledge, so it was now thought, extends man's control over nature. Reason was ahistorical, even anti-historical. Its quintessence was mathematical or "analytical," a capacity for formal, abstract calculation. The old quest for a purported wisdom was considered unenlightened. The related old traditions were expected to fade away with advancing knowledge.

The new rationality was uninterested in trying to penetrate the mystery of human life. It did not recognize any mystery. It can be argued that much of the older Western approach to knowledge had itself been overly intellectualistic and insufficiently historical, but it had taken life's higher meaning very seriously. Rationalism transformed academia and scholarship. Even students of what is distinctively human were excused from examining previously respected experiential evidence for the existence of goodness, truth and beauty. Because not susceptible to treatment by the prescribed investigative method, that evidence was ruled inadmissible or unreliable.

*Subjects
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of living
human
reality.*

In twentieth-century academia, the humanities and social sciences were invaded by people who sought to extend the rationality of science or some adapted version of it to all types of study. Calling their approaches "empiricism," "positivism," "behaviorism," "scientific value-relativism" and various other things, they sought to bring man as a social and creative being under explanatory schemes that drained subjects of their complex, living human reality. This reductionism produced a strong prejudice against letting man's concrete, historical, experiential sense of existence inform the study of human nature. The trend culminated in the progressive mathematization of disciplines. Ever-so-clever jugglers of abstractions placed all their emphasis on so-called "quantitative data." Who needed well-rounded humanists?

Abstraction as an Instrument for Power

The people who pushed for this change were in effect redefining what it means to be a human being. Directly and indirectly, they were able to change the standards for social advancement, specifically, those for exercising gate-keeping functions. The criteria for entering the better universities and hence the elites of society became in time strongly biased in favor of a capacity for abstract, ahistorical reasoning, as measured by the SAT, LSAT, GRE and similar tests. To be intelligent was to have a high IQ. "It doesn't take a rocket scientist . . ." we say and thereby pay a high compliment to a very specialized technician. But who would think of consulting this kind of expert on anything important? It might seem that humanity's greatest need is for people of wisdom and broad knowledge—but we commonly attribute real intelligence to rocket scientists.

Consider the power that lies in being able to define what intelligence is. It is the power to decide which kind of rationality is to be respected and favored, first of all in the universities. It is to that extent the power to select society's gatekeepers. By enthroning abstract, instrumental rationality, and discrediting a more historical, experientially based form of reason, it became possible to cut people in the West off intellectually from the sources of their civilization. Their civilization could be defined out of existence—a process that is today far advanced. Who might gain influence and stature as a result? Why, people particularly endowed with a potential for abstract rationality and predisposed for whatever reason to prefer it over the kind of reflection that the old tradition associates with profundity of insight.

*Ability
to define
intelligence
source of
power.*

Rationalism has been effective in undermining central features of the old Western civilization and unseating its elites. Not only in education but also in politics, the professions, finance and business the abstract, technical and instrumental approach served to push aside historically evolved beliefs, tastes and behaviors. Is it too far-fetched to speculate that social resentment directed at society's old gatekeepers helped give forward momentum to and even inspire rationalism?

Modern science is often described as "knowledge for power." The purpose of science is not to unlock the secrets of the universe, but to experiment its way towards a limited control of nature for the sake of human wellbeing. This pragmatic notion of scientific

*Science a
power for
good or ill.*

truth need not be destructive of the old sense of human priorities, can, in fact, be made compatible with it and enhance it, provided science does not exaggerate its own importance, harden into dogmatism or claim a monopoly on knowledge. But in the West the emphasis on science and technology came at the expense of attending to the issues of the inner life that traditional civilization had regarded as central. Few would want to forego the advances of modern science and the great conveniences brought by technology, but have these advances enhanced the quality of life where it matters most? Science and technology are instruments for good or ill. All depends on which kind of power scientific knowledge will serve. Science can come under the influence of a callous, narrow-minded ethos and become an instrument for just the wrong kind of power. But science can also receive its direction and tenor from people of broad and deep sensibility who integrate it into the larger purposes of humane civilization.

A central task of civilization is to tame, direct and refine the desire for power, to make power serve admirable motives. But the rise of rationalism coincided, not incongruously, with a desire to throw off the moral-religious and cultural restraints and tastes of traditional Western society. It became, among other things, the instrument for an increasingly unchecked desire for power and wealth. People rebelling against the old hierarchy of values and the corresponding social pecking order found in rationalism a potent weapon.

*Rationalism
allied with
"idealistic"
dreaming.*

So as not to seem to attribute undue importance to what is admittedly just one major factor in the transformation of Western society, it should be pointed out, if only in passing, that the rationalism that so heavily influenced the intellectual life has typically done so in symbiosis with a seemingly very different human attribute that has also undergone profound change—the imagination. Paradoxical though it may seem, “dry” rationalism from the very beginning usually co-existed and closely interacted with “idealistic” dreaming. The latter frequently veered in a utopian, romantic direction. Rationalism became intertwined with glowing imaginative visions of a vastly better world, which warmed the hearts of people who might otherwise have been chilled to the core by cold intellect. In the twentieth century especially humanitarian and egalitarian ideology, with mankind in general as its purported beneficiary, took the place of the traditional emphasis on personal

responsibility, love of neighbor and local community. The modern belief in social engineering, which applies a rationalistic blueprint mentality to society or the world, was attached to and emotionally fired by these seemingly benevolent plans for remaking human existence.⁷

This is not the place to discuss the role that modern humanitarian ideology played in unleashing and assisting the will to power. Suffice it to say that, almost as if designed to do so, it placed hitherto unimaginable power in the hands of political “servants of humanity.”⁸

The efforts of behaviorists and other dogmatic empiricists and quantifiers to rob even the humanities of their humane dimension generated considerable opposition, but it suggests the great sway of rationalism that those who received the most attention for protesting the general trend and the avoidance of value questions were themselves often rationalists, though in appearance sometimes defenders of “traditional values.” Among writers from the twentieth century one thinks, in particular, of Leo Strauss, whose criticism of the fact-value distinction was based on an anti-historical notion of philosophy. Strauss scorned respect for “the ancestral” or “the conventional” as inimical to real philosophy, whose concern must be with an abstractly conceived “nature.” Seeming to defend the Western tradition, he actually *discredited* the habit of seeking guidance in tradition. In recent decades so-called postmodernists have challenged rationalism, but they, too, usually engage in a largely abstract play with words destructive of received values, and they reject the very idea of civilization.

Even some defenders of “traditional values” are rationalistic.

Just as in academia people with an abstract, anti-historical, and perhaps socially resentful mind-set undermined humane subjects, so in the larger society did they undermine the ethos of traditional Western civilization. In the world of finance and business the tone was set increasingly by persons who combined a great desire for

⁷ For an examination of the role of romantic-utopian imagination in shaping the modern world and of how imagination relates to rationality, see Claes G. Ryn, “Imaginative Origins of Modernity: Life as Daydream and Nightmare,” *Humanitas*, Vol. X, No. 2 (1997). Available at <http://www.nhinet.org/ryn10-2.htm>.

⁸ The way in which sweeping and benevolent-sounding political projects for assisting the world’s unfortunate seem tailor-made to enhance the power of benevolent-sounding politicians is discussed at length in Claes G. Ryn, *America the Virtuous: The Crisis of Democracy and the Quest for Empire* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2003).

wealth with a knack for abstract calculation and general manipulation. They gradually replaced the more traditional bankers and entrepreneurs who were concerned about more than profit, not least the welfare of employees and the local community. In finance, rationalism and mathematization inspired trends towards ever-more abstract, amoral operations. It assisted the progressive fiscalization of the economy. Not only equities but also the creation of intricate new fiscal instruments, such as derivatives and, most recently “credit default swaps,” created opportunities for shifting assets and control to financiers far removed from the people actually running businesses or lending money. People who had let abstract rationality and a general bias against old traditions and elites separate them from humane values in the concrete found it increasingly difficult to distinguish between morality and immorality, honesty and crime. One might say that those who put a sophisticated manipulative intelligence in the service of an unlimited desire for self-enrichment and control became streamlined oligarchic men.

Published reports indicate that the movers and shakers on Wall Street have not only become singularly focused on maximizing profits and income. The crude, abrasive and foulmouthed personal behavior pervasive among these actors also confirms the great distance between them and the aristocratic, well-rounded personality that an older Western society admired.⁹

The Deconstruction of Traditional Civilization

Free-market ideologues will insist that none of these trends really matters as long as markets are free. As long as capital is invested where it will earn the best return, all will benefit. But this is to say that the purposes of civilization are unimportant or irrelevant. In the real world, leading money people who are consumed by greed and who favor purely abstract, rationalistic considerations poison not just the atmosphere of their own firms but also all with whom they do business or whom they affect. If they acquire decisive influence and become society’s ultimate gatekeepers, they can do great damage to civilization. A society dominated by such people would be increasingly marked by uncaring manipulation.

The leaders of our society tell us that discrimination is unacceptable. All should be given the same chance—in schools, the

⁹ See, for example, Andrew Ross Sorkin, *Too Big to Fail* (New York: Viking, 2009).

professions, sports, politics, and the marketplace. No one should be held back. No worse sin exists than being “prejudiced.” Ours is to be a society of “equal opportunity.” Like so much else in the current political-cultural regime, the principle of equal opportunity can be shown to be at once disingenuous and incompatible with the idea of civilization. It *seems* to say that all who are competent should have an equal chance to do a job, but in practice it means preventing people with certain moral and cultural beliefs from defending historically evolved standards. It does not mean equal opportunity for people who, for example, defend traditional family arrangements and feminine roles. It means censuring such people as “repressed” and “intolerant” and letting others receive advantages at their expense. Some of the strongest proponents of equal opportunity were never content with combating racial prejudice. Their ultimate agenda was not equal opportunity but replacement of the representatives of traditional values with representatives of a different ethos. This could be done in part by treating economic activity, for instance, as if it were purely a matter of efficiency and productivity and by making old Western standards for professional and other advancement, such as moral integrity, responsibility and civility, seem non-germane.

As often conceived, the principle of equality of opportunity ignores that civilization lives precisely by *denying* equal opportunity. Civilization announces and enforces its standards by *discriminating*—along moral, cultural and intellectual lines. It gives some an “A,” others an “F.” It prefers the wise philosopher to the clever wordmonger, the devout priest to the sentimentalist preacher, the real artist to the pornographer, the respectable lawyer to the shyster, the honest businessman to the conman, the responsible statesman to the demagogic deceiver, and the responsible financier to the greedy manipulator. *To end discrimination is to end civilization.* Differently put, civilization is and must be *prejudiced*—in favor of what strengthens it and against what weakens it. Most generally, it esteems the well-rounded humane person and disdains the single-minded self-seeker. As often practiced, equality of opportunity clears the way for people whom traditional Western civilization would have discouraged or blocked.

*Civilization
discriminates.*

The United States was intended to be a constitutional republic. It was to have government of limited, dispersed and decentralized powers. This notion of government assumed that people would

have moral, cultural and intellectual prejudices similar to those here described as “traditional.” Because those predispositions have substantially eroded and have been replaced by the kind of attitudes discussed above, America has changed markedly, and the rest of the Western world has followed a similar path. America still exhibits traces of its constitutional heritage and corresponding culture, but the restraints on power have greatly weakened along with the traditional civilization that formed and energized them. Americans still take pride in their “democracy,” but increasingly their views are formed and their decisions made by people at a great distance.

*An oligarchy
without
borders.*

Americans and others in the West live today under an essentially and progressively oligarchic regime, though one still employing quasi-democratic features. Its political-economic form is state capitalism or “crony” capitalism. It is a capitalism increasingly without borders, trying everywhere to break down or bypass national sovereignties that stand in the way of financial opportunity and control. The really big financial interests are able, in what most concerns them, to move governments. Those concerns are far from always exclusively financial. Sometimes they involve an assumed right for purportedly superior people to manipulate purported inferiors.

The current regime corresponds rather closely to Plato’s and Aristotle’s definition of oligarchy and subverts the traditional notion of civilization in that it lets the very rich control society for their own benefit. But the regime also bears the distinctive imprint of its particular time in history. It is indistinguishable from the anti-historical rationality, the culture of hedonism and sentimentality and the “equal opportunity” that assisted its rise and that it promotes. An orthodox Marxist analyzing the present oligarchic regime may find it sufficient to say that it reflects the state of the mode of production and the interest of the corresponding capitalist ruling class. What is being suggested here is that the regime manifests a steep decline of traditional civilization and rests on a synergy between economic interests and cultural radicalism. It was this decline that made possible the ascent of a particularly grasping and callous group of oligarchs and created circumstances more and more favorable to their manipulating society in their interest.

The capitalist oligarchy greatly benefited from the removal of the old civilizing pressures and restraints. It could acquire and

expand its power as traditional civilization's hierarchy of values began to lose its vitality and as the corresponding old elites had to withdraw from their gatekeeping roles. The oligarchic regime has everything to gain from promoting the anti-historical, rationalistic and more generally radical attitudes that made its emergence possible in the first place. It assuredly does not want a resurgence of traditional Western civilization. It wants to head off any chance that the abdicating old elites with their old, if fading, norms or the more traditional elements of the general population might rise up against the regime. Partly to weaken such potential opposition they support the anti-traditional forces in academia, the media, the arts, entertainment, politics and business. The oligarchy's more sophisticated leaders focus not merely on short-term gain but also on maintaining long-term control. To the extent that they cannot discredit or otherwise defuse opposition, they try to co-opt and divert it.

To overcome obstacles to getting something done, people combine, often in secret, with others who might help. Combination is a part of all human life. The cultural deconstruction just described is not centrally planned and operated by a few individuals, but mutuality of interests does play a major role. It involves a large and far from uniform alliance of like-minded people in which really big finance plays a crucial role and steers resources.

Counteraction Free of Illusion

The old Western world brought this predicament on itself by abandoning its hierarchy of values rather than creatively rearticulating it in some stronger form. The perpetrators of deconstruction are taking advantage of and aggravating a moral and cultural transformation that has been underway for a very long time. Identifying and blaming the most influential and perverse of these agents, however important it may be, would not address the fundamental problem, which is a lack of the spirit of humane civilization. Only a moral, intellectual and aesthetic flourishing could awaken this spirit, creatively adapt it to modern circumstances, restore a sound sense of priorities, and put business and finance in their proper place. Trying merely to return to and to repeat or imitate old standards and forms would be unavailing. Given the scope and depth of the transformation of the West, effecting a marked change of direction would require great energy

and creativity. Fresh, penetrating artistic vision is needed that can inspire a reorientation of the imagination and spark new, perhaps daring action. Also indispensable, though probably destined to be less than efficacious in the absence of an artistic flourishing, would be philosophical perspicacity regarding the nature of the problem to be confronted. Reconstituting something like the old Western aristocratic hierarchy of values would, in other words, take many years.

*Civilized
life under
relentless
attack.*

But the Western world is in acute danger—morally, intellectually, aesthetically, politically, and economically. Flagrantly irresponsible leaders, many of them wholly unknown to the public, are hiding from the masses the seriousness of problems that may require painful, even drastic change. People of great influence who recognize the dangers will not risk their positions by speaking bluntly. What remains of the old Western idea of civilized life is under relentless attack by means ranging from cultural and intellectual pollution, to politically correct multiculturalism and intolerance, to the flooding of Western society with culturally alien immigrants who further dilute allegiance to the old Western traditions.

The state of the Western world calls for emergency measures. Audacious departures from conventional thinking may be necessary. Standard “conservative” prescriptions for setting society right can at best retard the process of decline. A basic prerequisite for any realistic action, whether predominantly intellectual or political, is to shed all illusions regarding the nature and scope of the problem. Most immediately, defenders of civilization need to find ways of alerting a still largely oblivious educated public to the existence of a self-absorbed and increasingly tyrannical oligarchic regime.