
The Shifting Direction of America's Cultural Values

**Address to DYG's Annual SCAN Conference
New York, New York, May 29th, 1998**

by Daniel Yankelovich

This morning, I would like to explore a fascinating hypothesis with you, which is that the values revolution that began in the 1960s is now shifting direction. The consequences of the shift are not yet clear but they will grow unmistakably clear by the first decade of the new millennium.

I am talking about a shift in the society that includes our cultural values but also encompasses technology, economics and the way the society is organized. What makes the hypothesis particularly intriguing is that it comes from two independent sources drawing upon two different databases. Our SCAN database is one of them. The work of a University of Michigan team of social science researchers is the other.

SCAN. Over the past thirty years, our annual SCAN tracking studies have been telling a story that is now familiar to all of you. A cultural revolution incubated on the nation's college campuses in the 1960s. Initially, its true nature was disguised by the Vietnam war protests, but when the war ended the unrest on campus turned out not to be essentially about antiwar protests and radical politics but rather about cultural values. It was characterized by sharp discontinuities in many traditional values. For example, we lurched from lockstep social conformity to insisting on choosing our own lifestyles. We shifted from living in the future to living in the present. Our focus on work lurched for a short period of time to a focus on leisure. We lurched from puritanical, repressive attitudes towards sexuality to open, unrepressed sexuality, from duty to pleasure, from saving to spending.

The heart of this values revolution was a questioning of the traditional moral precept of automatic sacrifice for the family. Up through the 1950s, all sacrifices for the family were regarded as morally valuable irrespective of whether they were necessary in practical economic terms. The cultural climate in the 1960s raised the question of whether one needed to sacrifice one's own self-expressive needs if it was not economically necessary to do so. A "psychology of affluence" — an attitude that self-sacrifice was no longer economically necessary — began to replace the Depression psychology of want and scarcity.

In the 1970s the new values spread like wildfire. At the beginning of the decade, in 1970, the new values were held by a paltry 3% of the population — mainly the college-student sons and daughters of affluent parents. By 1980, at the end of the decade, a whopping 80% of the public subscribed to at least part of the new value orientation.

It all added up to a radical extension of individualism. In the 1950s, we Americans were political individualists but cultural conformists. We believed strongly in freedom of speech, freedom of movement, and the other freedoms the Bill of Rights guarantees to us. But we were social

conservatives. By the end of the 1970s, however, we had extended our individualism from the political to the cultural domain.

Our firm labeled the new value orientation "expressive individualism," -- not a memorable sound byte but a reasonably accurate description of the values transformations that the sixties and seventies had wrought.

The 1980s and 1990s were periods of consolidation, following the lurch-and-learn dynamic of the 1960s and 1970s. Americans soon rediscovered that they could find more self-fulfillment in work than in leisure. Hedonism receded when people learned from personal experience that engaging exclusively in the pursuit of pleasure led to an empty lifestyle that bred loneliness and even self-disgust. Americans gradually began to draw the line on certain forms of sexuality; practices such as adultery were seen increasingly as off limits. We became less judgmental about private morality even as we grew more judgmental about public morality. People were reluctant to judge other people's private morality because unless you are totally hypocritical, you have to grant to others the same freedom you demand for yourself. We are also rediscovering the need for parents to make sacrifices for their children, even when it is not economically necessary. These kinds of social learning have fine-tuned the values of expressive individualism.

The overall picture our research reveals is that the values of the 1960s are evolving in an orderly fashion but are now beginning to shift direction. Before I identify the shift, let me describe a line of inquiry that runs parallel to our own. At the beginning of my talk, I mentioned an independent database. I refer to the work of Ronald Inglehart, a political scientist at the University of Michigan who started to conduct survey research on international cultural values in 1970.

Inglehart's research. In 1970, Inglehart began his World Values Survey covering 20 countries. In 1981, he conducted a second wave of the World Values Survey in 22 countries. In 1990, he conducted another wave of surveys in 43 countries representing 70% of the world's population.

Inglehart labeled the new values his work identified in the 1970s and 1980s as "post materialist." What he means by post materialist is that people have come to feel that they can afford to shift their priorities away from the struggle for physical and economic survival toward self expressive concerns. (Our Australian research shows a similar pattern — a growing conviction that there is more to life than economics.) It is not surprising that once people succeed in ordering the economic side of their lives, they start to raise new questions about life's goals, and to look in places other than the economy for self satisfaction. What Inglehart calls post materialist values has essentially the same meaning as our term "psychology of affluence" — a psychological shift from giving priority to economic and physical security to giving priority to self expressiveness.

From his most recent work, Inglehart, like ourselves, detects a shift in society's goals, vision for the future and world view. Basically, he draws three conclusions about the new direction:

First, he now sees "post materialistic" values as merely one component of a broader cultural shift, a shift that other scholars have labeled "post modern."

Second, what he means by post modern is a redirection of modernization process. Up to now, modernization has generally meant wider education, lower levels of population growth and an emphasis on economic growth virtually at any cost. Historically, modernization has emphasized industrialization, economic efficiency, bureaucratic hierarchy and authority, scientific rationality, and to quote Inglehart, "the systematic application of technology to maximize the output of material things." During the period of worldwide modernization, most of which has taken place in this century, this pattern is what we have generally labeled as "progress."

Inglehart's third conclusion is that the postmodern direction is a decisive shift. It is not toward more of the same — more economic growth, more industrialization, more economic rationality, more material progress. Rather, it is a shift towards "a more humane society, with more room for individual autonomy, diversity and self expression." As Inglehart observes, "The uniformity and hierarchy that shaped modernization are giving way to an increasing acceptance of diversity. Instrumental rationality is giving way to quality of life."

According to Inglehart's criteria, the Nordic countries and the Netherlands are the most postmodern societies, followed by the United States, Germany and other Western European countries. (Most Americans, of course, have a different self-image which is that of the United States as the standard bearer for the rest of the world.)

Discussion. Let me make a few observations about Inglehart's three conclusions. First, I find it significant that he includes other nations as well as the United States in the category of postmodern cultures. Clearly, we are dealing with worldwide trends, not merely trends confined to the United States. (We saw the same pattern in the Australian presentation earlier today.)

Second, I find Inglehart's use of the word "post" confusing. In common usage, "post" means "after," as in over and done with. When we talk, for example, about the post World War II period we don't mean that World War II is two-thirds over or one-half over. We mean that it has completely ended. But the academic use of the prefix "post" almost never has that meaning. It usually signifies a shift in emphasis rather than the end of something.

I find this academic habit confusing because what is said to be post is still very much with us. By the phrase "postmodern" Inglehart doesn't mean that the modernization process is now behind us. Indeed, in pursuit of modernization, we are and will long remain a predominantly urban, market-driven, technological, bureaucratic, drudgery reducing, health conscious, risk averse, overly specialized and professionalized society preoccupied with improving people's material well-being. You just have to glance around to see that there's not much that is truly post about post-modernity. The shift in emphasis is simply a shift in direction. Inglehart's perspective is that "classic" modernization has more or less played itself out and having reached its natural limits, is now shifting direction.

I believe this perspective is correct. The modernization process is shifting direction. But there are other forces at play in addition to changing social values that are also helping to shape a new world view.

One of these is technology. There are many negative aspects to technology, but no one can doubt its power and its dynamism. Arguably, technology is the leading edge of the forces shaping a new world view.

Multiculturalism, related to the growth of the global economy, is another force.

Yet another is pressure from the public to change the way the society is organized so that it can be more responsive to the values of the individual. People are insisting that they have more say over decisions that affect their lives.

Yet another source of the shift in world views relates to the experiences Americans have gained from living with the values of expressive individualism for 30 years or more. These values are changing as a result of social learning. In the 1980s there was an explosion of narcissism in the society: it was the height of the "me" generation/baby boomer self-preoccupation. All forms of self-sacrifice were questioned. Now in the 1990s, Americans have learned from experience that if their children are to grow into caring responsible adults, parental sacrifice for children is necessary, however much money you may have.

Many Americans have resisted coming to this conclusion. They have tried everything else — quality time, giving more authority to kids, spoiling them (through a guilty conscience), and giving them a lot of new technology to play with. None of these strategies have worked, so that Americans find themselves reluctantly reverting to the traditional value of self-sacrifice for the family.

The shift in direction. Let us now take a quick glance at six trends that we believe are helping to shape a the new Millennial world view. The trends I want to describe are all broad and far-reaching. They are:

- Less hierarchy;
- More pluralistic ways of knowing;
- More diversity;
- Less compartmentalization;
- More spirituality;
- Deeper personal relationships.

Less Hierarchy. One of the most powerful forces in the country is the struggle to bring about a shift in the balance of power between average Americans on one hand and our institutions and experts on the other. This trend manifests itself most strikingly in the form of mistrust of government. The main reason for the mistrust is government's perceived lack of responsiveness: people feel that government excludes them from having a say in policies and decisions that affect their lives.

Overall, there is less acceptance and tolerance for all forms of hierarchy. Companies are moving toward flatter organizational structures, governments are moving toward devolution,

teachers in schools find they have less authority, even the medical profession, a bastion of hierarchy, is losing ground. Our research shows that in their search for the most appropriate kind of health care people actively shop for doctors and even shop for modes of treatment. In the field of genetic testing, for example, the typical physician's attitude is: "I tell my patients what their options are, and I advise them which option I think they should take." Increasingly, Americans reject this form of authority, and in so doing are helping to create the new profession of genetic counseling. People don't want their doctors to make important genetic decisions for them, such as what to do about possible genetic defects in newborns or fetuses. Typical doctors don't have the patience for counseling because their habitual mode is authoritarian. In contrast to doctors, genetic counselors help people to make their own decisions.

Even in the family, hierarchy has eroded. Parents no longer have as much authority over their children as they once did.

We are just beginning to feel the effects of this powerful trend, even though it has been unfolding for a long time. It is one of the most potent forces operating in the society today.

Pluralistic ways of knowing. Closely related to the erosion of hierarchy is a trend toward embracing pluralistic ways of understanding and gaining knowledge. Throughout Western history a single hierarchy of knowledge has held sway. More than 2,500 years ago, Plato advanced the notion of a hierarchy of knowledge, with abstract ideas at the top of the hierarchy and the opinions of the masses at the bottom. Remarkably, this concept of a hierarchy of knowledge has persisted ever since Plato's time. To be sure, the form of knowledge occupying the top spot has changed a number of times over the millennia. In the Middle Ages, religious ideas occupied the apex of the hierarchy. In the Enlightenment, rationality had top billing. In this century, science and technology have held the top spot. But even though many changes in the relative position of various forms of knowledge have occurred, the assumption of a single hierarchy has never changed. In today's hierarchy, physics and math occupy the top position. Next come astronomy and biology and other non-experimental natural sciences. Expert and professional knowledge occupy the next layer. Then come the insights of the humanities and scholars. At the very bottom comes public opinion. Significantly, over two and a half millennia the bottom position has never changed: the views of the mass public have always been assumed to be steeped in ignorance and to have less value as knowledge than any other way of knowing.

Finally, however, the very concept of a hierarchy of knowledge is being questioned as never before. Today, there is growing acceptance of the idea that knowledge is closely linked to human purpose. Forms of knowledge that suit one purpose may not suit another. Thus, if your purpose is to understand the physical nature of the universe, then natural science and technology are suitable forms of knowing. But if your purpose is to understand what values to live by, then the methods of the natural sciences do not work very well. Other ways of knowing are superior to those of science.

This radical idea has germinated in the theories of the German philosopher, Jurgen Habermas, and American pragmatic philosophers like Richard Rorty. But it has not yet spread very far throughout society. Yet, the grounds for its acceptance are fertile. In our SCAN findings, when we ask people whether they strongly agree with the statement that "modern science and technology

will ultimately supply us with all the answers we need," only 18% concur wholeheartedly. Three fifths of the public (61%) hold the view that science can tell us only so much and that we need intuition and spirituality to help us understand the rest. The everyday experience of people runs counter to the idea of a simple hierarchy of knowledge.

I am particularly enthusiastic about this trend because it can help us to overcome a certain lopsidedness in our society. It means that eventually, our society will make more room for insight, for moral truth, for the truths of the humanities and for the kinds of knowledge that come from experience. There will even be a place of honor reserved for the public's special form of wisdom and judgment, rescued at long last from the derision and contempt of experts and elites who hang onto the idea of a hierarchy because it makes them feel superior to ordinary people.

Diversity. Not only is the American public embracing new points of view, cultures and values, it is also experimenting with an ever-expanding diversity of ways of thinking. We are coming to accept pluralism of all sorts, in ethnic groups, races, lifestyles, styles of music, styles of action, and even styles of thought. This acceptance of diversity is part of the positive heritage of the 1960s. Many sixties-driven trends have had negative consequences for society, but not the insistence that diversity is inherently good. When I think back to my youth, growing up in Boston in a narrow status-driven, WASP-dominated society with little acceptance of diversity, I see an extraordinary change. And I believe it will continue unabated.

Less compartmentalization. The next trend — the blurring of boundaries and the breakdown of compartmentalization -- is one of the most important and far reaching trends shaping the future. We see it everywhere. It occurred first in the blurring of gender roles in marriage; now we see it in the blurring of lines dividing businesses from one another, in the forming of strategic alliances between competitive companies.

One of the most radical forms of blurring is in academia where the boundaries dividing disciplines from each other are fading.

Even national identity is affected. San Diego and Mexico are regarded as one region. Europe is becoming a single entity.

The lines are blurring between profit and nonprofit organizations, between public and private, between leaders and followers. The extreme specialization and division of labor that has been so characteristic of the modernization process is at long last giving way to a greater concern for unity and integration.

More spirituality. Our SCAN findings show a growing public interest in spirituality. It is important to distinguish here between organized religion and spirituality. We see no signs in our research that our society is heading into a new age of religion in the conventional sense. Indeed, many forms of organized religion continue to lose appeal. Churches tend to be hierarchical in a world that is rejecting hierarchy, and sectarian in a world that is growing more pluralistic. Thus, we are seeing the flowering of spirituality outside of the confines of organized religion.

There is a growing hunger in the nation for forms of transcendence and deeper meaning. This quest for spirituality pervades all domains of American life, for example, the public's conviction that physical healing has a spiritual dimension, leading to an increased acceptance of alternative forms of medicine as aspect of spirituality.

Another factor reinforcing today's spirituality is an important shift in what philosophers call "cosmology," the conception that people hold about the nature of the universe. In the 18th and 19th centuries, cosmology advanced the picture of a finished, closed universe. Today, we have a plethora of scientific theories such as quantum and chaos theory that reveal a universe still in the process of being created. This cosmological image of an unfinished, still-evolving universe gives powerful reinforcement to the quest for transcendence and spirituality. The old notion of a finished, closed universe strengthened the schism between science and religion; the new scientific world view is leading toward a greater reconciliation between science and religion.

Deeper personal relationships. In all walks of life, we see a trend toward wanting to convert impersonal transactions into personal relationships. Americans have a deep desire to escape the impersonality of so much of daily life. This desire also has a spiritual aspect. People want to find a way to overcome the distancing and impersonality of modern life with something more human.

Many years ago, the philosopher Martin Buber introduced us to his illuminating distinction between I-thou relationships and I-it relationships. The I-thou relationship eliminates the distance and impersonality of the transactions we have with objects (the I-it relationship). In the I-thou mode we encounter each other as unique persons and we transform one another.

Americans yearn to shift their lives toward the I-thou direction -- in marriage, friendship, the work place, neighborhoods, health care and even the marketplace. We are hungry for community, for the opportunity to live among others who know us and relate to us as people rather than as customers, patients, voters, or mailing addresses. In private life, personal relationships create intimacy; in public life they create stability and mutual respect.

Conclusion. Let me conclude by relating this perspective to the central theme of this conference — the role of technology. With the Millennium on our doorstep, I have tried to take a glance at a longer and broader time frame than that of SCAN. In the future the need to control technology rather than have it control us will assume increasing urgency. The changes in the values infrastructure I have recounted will help us do this. To contain and limit the dark side of technology, we will need a less hierarchical, more pluralistic, less compartmentalized society with greater openness to multiple ways of knowing, an added spiritual dimension, and above all, deeper, less impersonal human relationships.

If our society does succeed in evolving this way, perhaps we can enjoy the blessings of technology in the context of a truly humane society, rather than be destroyed by it.