

WORDS OF PRAISE

With his characteristic blend of fascinating stories, dry wit, and penetrating insights, Witkowski skewers a remarkable range of currently influential beliefs, fantasies, and post-truths. Dogmatists may not like the book, but anyone with a lively curiosity and open mind will find him or herself smiling with fascination at these essays. Modern civilization has benefited from the science and thought of many bygone centuries—yet somehow we find ourselves lost amid a wide assortment of baffling and dubious assertions. This book is a welcome challenge to much prevailing nonsense.

—**Prof. Roy F. Baumeister**, University of Queensland, Australia,
author of *The Science of Free Will*

I strongly recommend this impressive collection of essays focusing on the critical analysis of a wide range of contemporary issues, from masculinity and mindfulness to psychotherapy and deceptive social science research. It is an excellent antidote to the mixture of misinformation, intellectual pabulum, and misplaced “common sense” that so often masquerades for wisdom in these turbulent times.

—**Prof. James Alcock**, York University, Canada,
author of *Parapsychology—Science Or Magic?*

Recipe for a 21st-Century Children’s Crusade is a delightful collection of essays on some of society’s most challenging topics—the value of a life, the future of work, and progress in science. Witkowski describes the value of provocation to promote the consideration of all possibilities, and this book certainly meets that criterion.

—**Prof. Brian Nosek**, University of Virginia,
co-founder and director of the Center for Open Science

In *Recipe for a 21st-Century Children's Crusade*, psychologist Tomasz Witkowski offers a collection of provocative and lively essays on a range of topics. Samples: Is it really useful for children to spend time in extracurricular activities? Are anxiety and depression on the rise? Are suicide rates skyrocketing? What kind of support should we give to people who have been traumatized, or would they be better off without it? The author, a longtime friend of scientific skepticism, continues his valuable tradition of busting myths. He forces readers to realize that what they think is true may not be true, and that it might be time to reconsider many of their cherished beliefs.

—**Prof. Elizabeth Loftus**, University of California, Irvine,
Past President, Association for Psychological Science

Tomasz Witkowski has once again addressed the elephant in the room of psychology. He brings a self-confrontational skepticism to the table. The “shrinks” around the table don’t want it, but they need it. Witkowski not only reflects on complicated scientific aspects of psychology: he also elevates the psychological challenges to an ethical, political and philosophical level, reminding us all there is more to science than science.

—**Teddy Winroth**, Licensed Psychologist and
Licensed Psychotherapist, Sweden

Recipe for a 21st-Century Children's Crusade is a readable, eloquent and thought-provoking exploration of a broad range of contemporary societal challenges with which we seem forever to be struggling. Witkowski sheds much light on these issues, offering insights that are as enlightening as they are unsettling. This important and highly accessible book is a compelling read for all who are concerned about the intersection of culture, science, and rational thought.

—**Michael Heap**, Clinical Forensic Psychologist in Sheffield, UK

These essays make you think about all sorts of problems—from epigenetics to allocating limited resources to saving individuals rather than numerous nameless people. The essays are easy to read but they are scientific literature—with references to the used sources given in all chapters. I recommend this book highly.

—**Prof. Ewa Bartnik**, Polish Academy of Science

Recipe for a 21st-Century Children's Crusade is a readable set of thought-provoking essays on relevant contemporary controversies in psychology, psychiatry, biology and philosophy.

—**Prof. Trevor Robbins**, University of Cambridge,
coauthor of *The Neurobiology of Addiction*

Witkowski has been tirelessly tracking the apparent truths that contemporary culture feeds us for years. In his latest book, he discovers the meanders of our thinking, sneaks into the temple of science to investigate what is hidden behind its altars, checks what has been masked by the colorful decorations of pop psychology, and pokes his nose behind the façade of therapeutic culture, exposing its distortions and simplifications. I highly recommend reading the book to anyone who does not want to skitter along the surface of popular beliefs!

—**Konrad Szolajski**, Film Director, Screenwriter

Although the world of academic diplomacy values “balanced judgments” and “problem complexity”, Tomasz Witkowski puts forward an uncomfortable thesis—science needs unambiguity. Without it, we become pawns in a scientific game of appearances. The author removes the halo of infallibility from the heads of celebrity authorities and makes us aware of how often we accept nonsense, celebrate pseudoscience and preserve errors. This is a book for those who are not afraid of difficult questions and are not satisfied with comfortable answers.

—**Jakub Jamrozek**, Polish Radio Journalist

A must-read for anyone who likes to be amazed, surprised, unsettled. For those who always think contrary to prevailing theories. It always pays off, although it is never easy.

—**Krystyna Romanowska**, Journalist

**RECIPE FOR A
21ST-CENTURY
CHILDREN'S
CRUSADE**

RECIPE FOR A 21ST-CENTURY CHILDREN'S CRUSADE

ESSAYS ON CULTURE,
SCIENCE, AND PSYCHOLOGY

TOMASZ WITKOWSKI

Foreword by Roy F. Baumeister
Translated by Ken Fleming & Jolanta Pers



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*Recipe for a 21st-Century Children's Crusade:
Essays on Culture, Science, and Psychology*

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*Those who can make you believe absurdities
can make you commit atrocities.*

—Voltaire

CONTENTS

Foreword by Roy F. Baumeister.....xiii

Part I: Traps of Culture 1

Chapter 1: Recipe for a 21st-Century Children’s Crusade..... 3

Chapter 2: The Rescue Civilization 13

Chapter 3: Trapped in Hospital Ideology..... 23

Chapter 4: The Crisis of Masculinity Tethered
by the Short Leash of Biology.....33

Chapter 5: Towards a Brave New World without Work 43

Chapter 6: The Provocateur or the Provoked? 53

Part II: The Meanders of Science 71

Chapter 7: Postmodernism: An Intellectual Hiccup..... 73

Chapter 8: On the Benefits of the Death of Great Scientists
for the Progress of Science.....81

Chapter 9: Who Cleans Up in the Temple of Science..... 89

Chapter 10: An Epigenetic “Breakthrough”
in Inheritance Theory?99

Chapter 11: The Apparent Mental Causation
of Science and Pseudoscience.....109

Part III: Illusions of Pop-Psychology..... 123

Chapter 12: Inescapable Authenticity..... 125

Chapter 13: The Bright Side of Bad Emotions 133

Chapter 14: Mindfulness—a Panacea or a New “Drug”?..... 141

Chapter 15: Better Than a Bartender?	151
Chapter 16: In the Best Possible of all Worlds	159
Chapter 17: Wisdom Quotient.....	167
Part IV: In the Embrace of Therapeutic Culture	183
Chapter 18: Turning Back the Ships of Fools	185
Chapter 19: Repairing the Child in a Therapeutic Pit Stop	197
Chapter 20: Struggling with Trauma	207
Chapter 21: Psychotherapy and Themis.....	215
Chapter 22: Remember, Any Contact with a Therapist Can Be Used Against You!	225

FOREWORD¹

by Roy F. Baumeister

What separates humankind from all the animals? No doubt there are many answers. My own efforts to understand the human essence led me, after a long search, to realize a key point about essential human nature. Although was shaped by evolution, just like all the other creatures, it was tailored for a very unusual strategy, namely culture. The traits that set us apart from all the other mammals are the result of adaptations to make culture possible. Culture is a way of organizing society, so as to improve the general prospects for survival and reproduction. Indeed, the very word ‘culture’ began with agriculture—farming—which is a manner of producing food that is found all over the world among humans but is almost entirely absent in other species. Other animals need food too, but they have never realized that by farming they can produce more food, more reliably, than with other strategies.

If one takes a closer look at the traits that separate humans from other animals, two clusters stand out: communication and cooperation. The august Jonathan Haidt dubbed humankind “the world champions of cooperation,” because we cooperate in more ways and more complex ways, with more different people, than other mammals. (One could make the argument that giant ant colonies are also pretty good, but their cooperation is hard-wired, unconscious, and relatively inflexible.) Indeed, a market economy is essentially a giant framework for cooperation. The buyer wants to buy and the seller wants to sell, and if they can make the deal at a mutually acceptable price, they are both better off. That’s the essence of cooperation, working together for increased mutual benefit.

Trade is found in all modern cultures and most ancient ones. Yet you will have to look pretty hard to find anything resembling trade in any other species. Money makes trade much easier, which is presumably why all countries in the world today have money, and indeed, when money was invented it spread rapidly from one society to another. No society to my knowledge has ever succeeded in getting rid of money (though the Soviet Union tried, briefly, which was a disaster). But no animals have invented money.

If we are the world champions of cooperation, we are also, probably even more so, champions of communication. Linguists mostly agree that animal communication never reaches the level of having a genuine language. Meanwhile, every known human society has language. Anthropologists love to find exceptions to every general rule, and finding a society without language would be a major career coup for an ambitious anthropologist. But there doesn't seem to be one. Language is thus another of those traits that is central and essential to humankind. It is also a major part of culture. Without language, culture would be primitive.

What's so great about language? It enables us to share information. When a typical non-human animal reaches the end of its life, its brain contains all that it learned during its life. Nearly all of that knowledge comes from direct experience or direct observation of another animal doing something. Contrast that with the knowledge in the typical human brain. Only a tiny proportion comes from direct experience, and another small part from directly observing others. Much of it comes from talking, reading, listening. As an obvious example, most people know basic arithmetic, but hardly anyone worked it out for self. Instead, they learned it in school. The knowledge itself was built up over centuries and is passed along efficiently by schools. (Schools, too, are unique to humans, as there is so much information to transmit to new members of society that schools are the most efficient and effective means of doing so.)

So far, so good. I have spent my career as a scientist, cooperating and communicating with others in the joint pursuit of truth. It is easy to see the value of information, such as arithmetic. How to grow crops was of course vital for agriculture.

The problem with all that is that the obvious value of information (and thus of communication) depends on the information being *true*. The value of false information is much harder to appreciate. Indeed, false information can be dangerous. A street vendor who doesn't know enough arithmetic to make cash transactions correctly will soon be out of business.

Of course there mistakes here and there. But it is comfortable to assume that these isolated errors will soon be corrected, such as by the progress of science. It is a pleasant and appealing vision of the world to assume that culture is about cooperating with other people to build a correct understanding of the world, gradually weeding out the few errors that may have crept in.

All of this brings me to Tomasz Witkowski's book, which you hold in your hands. It is an intense blast aimed at the comfortable notion that culture is about building a shared, truthful vision of the world. Error, bias, and distortion infest all manner of human thought, individually and collectively. Many people prosper in human society, not by advancing the collective understanding of the truth, but indeed by promoting and disseminating falsehoods.

Indeed, while reading this rich and entertaining book you are likely to find yourself (as I found myself) laughing, moaning, and shaking your head. Not only is the extent of falsehood in human culture far greater than I, at least, had naively assumed—even the faith in progress toward truth will be shaken here. In some respects falsehood may be on the rise.

It is clear that many societies survive for a long time with false beliefs built deeply into the collective consciousness. Religion provides a compelling example. Even if you believe firmly in the truth of one particular religion, it is clear that there are many false religions and have been plenty more in the past. (This is almost guaranteed, because different religions contradict each other.) Yet these false beliefs are shared by large groups, even entire societies, for a long time. Indeed, sometimes people who question the false beliefs are persecuted or even put to death.

All this calls for a serious reappraisal of the role of truth in human life and society. At very least, the drive to seek the truth often

competes with a drive to believe what everyone else in your group believes. But even that's not quite so simple. People don't willingly embrace falsehoods, at least not in most cases. Instead, they accept what everyone else believes as true, and they don't question it.

There are also powerful forces that have an interest in spreading and maintaining falsehoods. When contrary opinions are viciously suppressed, one should generally suspect that some powerful elites are trying to maintain a false view. After all, if you have the truth on your side, you don't need to intimidate or punish people who dissent. You also don't need to stifle research. True theories gain strength from the open competition of ideas and evidence. But the more your preferred view is false, the more dangerous is the free play of ideas, and the more risk there is that open-minded inquiry will reveal your falsehood. This principle seems to be disappearing from modern American society and even from social science, where the suppression of dissent has now become entrenched in many places.

By providing so many lively and fascinating instances of cultural falsehoods, Witkowski's book does a great service to those of us who still cling to the hope that truth will win eventually and aspire to move things in that direction. The path ahead to the eventual triumph of truth is at best very long, at worst hopelessly blocked. And apart from concern about society, the book is informative and entertaining. I wish you a pleasant albeit sobering read!

Roy F. Baumeister

Endnote

1. The foreword in this book was originally written for a larger collection of essays that was later divided into two volumes—*Fades, Fakes, and Frauds: Exploding Myths in Culture, Science, and Psychology*, published in 2022, and *Recipe for a 21st-Century Children's Crusade. Essays on Culture, Science and Psychology*.

PART I

TRAPS OF CULTURE

*“You think this is a trap then?” the Count asked.
“I always think everything is a trap until proven otherwise,”
the Prince answered. “Which is why I’m still alive.”*

—William Goldman

1

RECIPE FOR A 21ST-CENTURY CHILDREN'S CRUSADE

It takes a village to raise a child, and a community to save them.

—Ann Douglas

In May 1212, twelve-year-old Stephen of Cloyes announced to the world that Jesus Christ had authorized him to organize a crusade to the Holy Land. He drew crowds of children with him, all traveling south. Most of them were boys from peasant families, but there were also some sons of the nobility. Some had run away from home, others had left with the family's blessing. A group of girls and a number of young priests and adult pilgrims also joined them. Stephen persuaded at least three thousand children to take part in the crusade, although some sources say it was even as many as half a million. Many of them died on the way due to hunger and the extreme heat. When they reached Marseilles, the sea did not part as Stephen had prophesied, and so some of the discouraged participants returned home. As for those who remained, a cunning merchant offered to transport them to the Holy Land in his seven ships. Two of them sank, and the passengers of the other five were sold into slavery to the Saracens.

When news of Stephen's crusade reached Germany, shortly after it set out, Nicholas of Cologne gathered an army of local children ready to go south. This was a significantly smaller group,

numbering “only” twelve thousand. When they reached the shore, the sea refused to part for them too. They decided to wander on until they reached the place where the miracle was prophesied to take place. A few returned, but the others were never heard of again.

Epidemic of Suicides

The history of the Children's Crusades is invaluable as the pretext for a thought experiment which can provide us with a better insight into the present. After all, as the universal but irrefutable wisdom has it, those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it. So ask yourselves, dear readers, a few questions: Why did children go on crusades in the 13th century? Why were there no such crusades either earlier or later in our history? Why did those crusades start from France and Germany, and not from, say, Poland or Scandinavia? Why aren't they happening today? And the most important question: what elements of the reality in force at the beginning of the thirteenth century should be eliminated to prevent such tragic crusades? Feel free, gentle reader, to be as ungentle as you like, here. This is, after all, purely an exercise in imagination ...

More than eight hundred years after the Children's Crusades, we are experiencing what we have generally come to call an epidemic of suicide among children and adolescents.¹ Three decades ago, the gravest public health threats to teenagers in the United States came from binge drinking, drunk driving, teenage pregnancy and smoking.² These have since fallen sharply, replaced by a new public health concern: soaring rates of mental health disorders and suicide attempts.³ For people aged ten to twenty-four, suicide rates, stable from 2000 to 2007, leaped 57.4 percent from 6.8 per 100,000 in 2007 to 10.7 in 2018. Between 2007–2009 and 2016–2018, suicide rates increased significantly in 42 states. In the ten years leading up to the Covid pandemic, suicidal thoughts and behaviors increased by about 40 percent among young people, according to

the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.⁴ A study published in 2023 found that 22 percent of teenagers had considered attempting suicide in the past year, of which female students accounted for more than twice the attempts by male students.⁵

This epidemic of suicide is not just an American problem. In Europe, suicide is the second most common cause of death among adolescents aged fifteen to nineteen. Tragically, almost 1,200 children and adolescents aged ten to nineteen end their own lives every year, which is an estimated three lives per day lost to suicide in Europe.⁶ A record number of suicide attempts by children and adolescents was noted in Poland in 2022.⁷ The number of suicide attempts in this country has been growing significantly since 2013 (except for 2020). However, the recent increase is shocking. While in 2020 there were 843 suicide attempts made by children, in 2021 this figure was as high as 1,496. It is interesting to note that the number of suicide attempts ending in death has been decreasing at the same time. Just for an example, in 2013, 148 children killed themselves, while in 2020 the figure was 107. An increase was again recorded in 2021, when the figure rose to 127. Disturbingly, the number of suicide attempts in 2020 by children aged seven to twelve was 29, but in 2021 this figure had increased to 51. Currently, about 6 percent of deaths among children and adolescents under the age of eighteen are suicides. Fortunately, in the zero to six age group, there have been no recorded suicide attempts resulting in death since 2013, although psychologists report that recently children aged as young as six have begun to report suicidal thoughts.

It is difficult to obtain reliable historical data which could be used for comparison, but the few studies that appeared at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and later, before World War II, show that these numbers were significantly lower—at least in Europe.⁸ However, it is worth noting that the phenomenon of suicide among children and adolescents, although not as intense as it is currently, has always been an element of social reality. The increase in these depressing indicators

is accompanied by an increasing number of studies whose authors are looking for possible reasons for this state of affairs, as well as ways to counteract these unfavorable trends.

Depressing Marketing

Among the reasons for suicide among young people, the most commonly cited are lack of support from parents, domestic violence, ridicule by peers, drugs, debts, being confined within four walls, problems with sexual orientation and a cry of despair. Of course, most cases are complex and their causes arranged in various configurations. Following identification of the causes, suggestions for solutions and prevention begin to multiply. Family, school, and the health service are made responsible for them, and work of a psychologist with children from the earliest years, and improvement (even reform) of psychiatric care are frequently proposed as solutions.

At this point, it is worth returning to the Children's Crusades, remembering, however, that they serve as an analogy, not a homology. From time immemorial, children and young people have left their homes, either going it alone or in the company of similar people in search of a desired goal. However, never in history have they done so *en masse*, as they did during the Children's Crusades. Similarly, for centuries those most at odds with the reality surrounding them have taken their own life, although probably never on the same scale we are dealing with today. We can only surmise as to the peasant families of the 13th century, that communication with parents was not at a higher level than it is today, that domestic violence went completely unpunished, and that a young person's peers would have been merciless in regard to any differences among them—yet these were not the reasons that caused French and German children to leave their homes *in großen Mengen*.

If you have considered the answers to the questions posed in the introduction, you have surely come to the conclusion that the

Children's Crusades would never have taken place at all if they had not been organized by adults. However, this alone would not be enough if it were not supplemented by the near-unlimited apotheosis of the foremost authorities for this type of action, and if their preeminent figures were not venerated, and legends created around them. It is enough to eliminate these factors from reality, and no children's crusade would ever take to the road. It is precisely because these causes are absent from the present environment that children nowadays so rarely follow peer group prophets in searching for doom. This is also why children in other parts of the world have not dreamed exclusively of liberating Jerusalem from the hands of infidels. Although today it is difficult to determine, it can certainly be assumed that, without eliminating these basic factors, any preventive measures would not bring much of a result.

The culture in which today's children live, is permeated with a grim, thoughtless marketing of depression, suicide and a victim mentality. Throughout history, have there ever been similar situations like the one that took place in Poland when, during a public demonstration, a celebrity journalist wore a tee-shirt with images of five LGBT suicides in order to pay tribute to them and honor their memory?⁹ Have universally accessible magazines, electronic media, television, and radio ever been so often drawn to the issue of suicide? Have we ever had such direct access to information about the suicide of famous people on social media?¹⁰ Have there ever been as many public predictions of an increase in suicide rates as there were during the recent pandemic and immediately after it? Has the entertainment industry ever released so many films glorifying suicide in the past without opposition?¹¹

In the Land of Self-Fulfilling Prophecies

The practice of getting used to the most risky options is recognized in the psychology of decision making. Those whose task it is to consider various alternatives reject the extremely risky or ridiculous

ones as outliers from the outset. However, if you persuade people to talk about them, to analyze the pros and cons, and to reflect on them frequently, their tendency to choose these options increases noticeably. It is no different with thoughts of suicide. This thinking, alien in its very nature to us all, especially young people, is gradually becoming acceptable. It is starting to inhabit our environment and our culture. It is all around us, and even if it is so alien, does not social fairness allow that it is a solution worth considering? "If so many people are choosing this option more frequently, couldn't this also be a solution for me?" Thus, we are imperceptibly sleepwalking into a world of self-fulfilling prophecies.

Research shows that an increase in the number of suicides occurs not only after the media publicize the suicide death of someone well-known, in accordance with the so-called Werther effect. A team of Austrian and German psychologists, psychiatrists and communication specialists, who conducted an extensive analysis of nearly five hundred press reports devoted to suicide, showed that the likelihood of more frequent suicides is also increased by articles containing objective expert opinions and epidemiological facts related to the phenomenon.¹² At least several dozen—sometimes even several hundred—such publications appear in the world's media every week. Many of them do not meet the requirements of the Reportingonsuicide.org agreement respected by major schools of journalism and associations of journalists across the world.

These requirements are also not met by the media statements of therapists forecasting an increase in the number of suicides, and frightening everybody with their prognoses. Repeating that ignoring depression can lead to suicide and continuing to publish similar statements may help to drive alarmed patients into the consulting rooms of therapists, but by all measures it is detrimental to the prevention of suicidal behavior.

Absolute exceptions include such media reports that may trigger the so-called Papageno effect, i.e. a decrease in the number of suicides. This Werther-opposing, lesser-known effect is named

after one of the characters in Mozart's *The Magic Flute*—Papageno. Disappointed in love, he determines to take his own life, but he is dissuaded from this by a conversation with three young boys who show him alternative ways to solve his situation. Showing suicide in the right perspective can prevent it, as was also confirmed by the studies mentioned earlier.

Recipe for a 21st-Century Children's Crusade

The attractiveness of suicide as a solution is additionally enhanced by the social affirmation of the role of victim. A discovery by Sameer Hinduja and his research colleagues at the Cyberbullying Research Center in Florida points to a rather alarming cultural shift in this regard. By researching a group of about 5,500 teenagers, they discovered that about 5 percent of them systematically and anonymously undertook acts of cyberbullying against ... themselves! Interestingly, it turned out that these behaviors were twelve times more common among the victims of cyberbullying than among people who had not previously experienced any kind of hate from other people.¹³ One can only guess that the status of victim, once achieved, was so gratifying that the subjects were tempted to maintain it. One can also be tempted to assume that the significant increase in the number of non-fatal suicide attempts in relation to fatal ones proves the simulated nature of the former. Thanks to such attempts, would-be victims probably receive from the environment what they previously failed to achieve in terms of validation and sympathy.

There is no simple recipe to reverse cultural trends once they have been initiated, but there is a simple recipe to consolidate and deepen them. It is enough to continue what has already been started—publish as many alarming statistics as possible, together with the statements of specialists commenting on them, reports of suicides of children and adolescents, catastrophic forecasts, and series popularizing death by one's own hand. If the media image