



Too Much Optimism

Now that the optimism of Donald Trump and Jaire Bolsonaro has been exposed as reckless indifference to public health, the perils of extreme optimism are obvious enough. Yet Trump and Bolsonaro are not alone - most political leaders have indulged flights of fantasy in the face of contrary epidemiology and hygienic measures necessary to curb any infectious disease, or in context of properly assessing any new vaccine. To be generous, one could call this political activity 'cautious optimism', as the newscasters would put it. At the risk of being brutal we might just settle for *optimism*. This essay continues an exploration of a more generic state: *cultural optimism* - an expectation that now characterises social life in the west, and possibly everywhere. It is particularly important to recognise the negative influence that optimism has today. In the context of a global pandemic and global climate change we are now at a critical point in world history.

The need for simple explanations looms large. As the human species rushes on into an era of climate change, over-population, over-consumption and endless growth, the simple idea of human excess seems obvious enough. But after at least fifty years of agitation this apparently obvious idea does not appear to be gaining enough traction to prevent a total catastrophe in the coming decades. The really pressing question now concerns the 'mass psychology' of excess. Why is it that the species seems so resolutely committed to a 2-5 degrees C global increase in temperature by the end of the century (see, for example, the latest UN Report which says 'Nations are "nowhere close" to the level of action needed to fight global warming . . . and limit the temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius by the end of the century', *UN Climate and Environment*, 26 February 2021). 1.5 degrees Celsius should be read as a politically convenient number. Realistically, the possibility of limiting global temperature rises to 1.5 degrees C has long gone.

It is true that belief in the future power of technological progress, coupled with a belief in God is a sufficient cause for a catastrophe anytime, but there is at present another simple but unrecognised cultural factor at play: too much optimism, or to be more precise, too much 'cultural optimism'. One of the main reasons why economists still believe in endless economic growth, why technocrats put their faith in new technologies, why the religious still believe in a benevolent God, and why individual citizens still believe in their unfettered rights to breed and consume, is too much cultural optimism. Too much optimism is definitely increasing global temperatures.

To be brief, I mostly talk about 'optimism', but really something more insidious is involved. What used to be identified dismissively as a part of 'ruling class culture' has become popular culture, or 'common sense'. Optimism is now taken for granted as routine good sense; in other words, optimism has become mainstreamed, and as argued in this essay, overdone.

It might seem unnecessary to recapitulate the great peril that optimism can present. Optimism is often not evidence based; and when it isn't can result in grandiose expectation, fraud, lies and deceit. One term of a Trump presidency and twelve months of a global pandemic have allowed us to see it all on TV. Optimism is today a key factor in understanding what appears to be a great western cultural decline - including the rise of 'fake news', 'alternative facts', faith based ruling elites, and climate change denial. Strange as it may seem, one root cause of this cultural decline is too much optimism.

Yet it's not as if optimism were an unknown phenomenon - as early as the eighteenth century Voltaire was able to satirise optimism in a way that is still highly cogent. The idea that we live in 'the best of all possible worlds' is just as relevant today - but arguably even more problematic. For instance, the great optimism of a Donald Trump, or any other authoritarian leader, is clearly a danger to the health and safety of all, and in the case of climate change denial, to the whole planet. The trouble is, in a 'post-Trump'

era, the truth about anything passes through the lenses of journalism, social media and ‘search engines’ – that is to say, idiosyncratic opinion is always a worry. ‘Fact checking’ has become very necessary indeed. Optimistic projections, particularly when they originate with politicians, advertising, or face book posts, now deserve a very high level of suspicion. It is not that fact checking was ever unnecessary; it is more that optimism has become such a chronic problem that fact checking is now *de rigueur* for those concerned with the truth of things.

It needs to be noted that before Voltaire’s time optimism - and hope - were more theologically loaded than they are today. In contrast, optimism has today become thoroughly secularised; hope, however, remains tinged with theological meaning - even though it is possible to be quite godless in one’s hopes (and fears). Although hope is not the primary focus of this essay, even in a secularised world it is hard to separate hope from optimism. But separated they must be, as I go on to explain.

As an example of the apparently inextricable connection of optimism and hope, the great global ‘optimistic hope’ today is that there will be an economic recovery despite risk of infection by the Covid 19 virus, and its mutations, caused primarily by renewed economic activity – some may even suggest that an economic downturn is a worse result than the pandemic itself. The mass production and administration of vaccines is the latest object of what surely is ‘optimistic hope’. Indeed, optimism is not fussy – there is always some reason to hope for a positive outcome. Hope is often sensible and rationally oriented, as in the hope for a vaccine. Optimism, however, can confound and confuse the case - as we have seen in the vaccine related utterances of Donald Trump. Optimism may dispose people to ignore ‘the science’, as we see, and encourage behaviour quite contrary to principles of good hygiene. Optimism may even be associated with hope for divine intervention. In short, optimism can lead to the denial of scientific evidence - as we see in the case of climate change denial, and crowd behaviour in a pandemic. None of these phenomena would make sense without a great deal of optimism and hope.

Clearly, as I continue to argue, optimism and hope are closely linked; sensibly perhaps, optimism requires hope to be positive. However, optimism can also cause hope to be extended, in the minds of many, to some kind of Messianic expectation. There is nothing new in this observation – but it is noteworthy how climate change denial makes good sense in the context of religiously based thinking. Why worry if divine intervention will enable humanity to continue on as stewards of all creation, in accord with God’s great plan? . . . even if the ways of the Lord are mysterious and beyond mortal comprehension?

The role of optimistic hope is important in understanding how it can be that otherwise sensible people can continue to deny, or ignore, contrary facts. In Australia, for example, the economic pleading of the coal lobby coincides with the religious beliefs of many conservative and liberal politicians. ‘Denialists’ in Australia, like denialists in the USA and elsewhere, are often awaiting God’s eventual intervention, or even worse, awaiting an inevitable Armageddon – which makes doing anything an apparently pointless exercise. Taken to an extreme, optimism can lead to totally mindless complacency.

The Black Lives Matter social movement sweeping the planet is another contemporary example showing the interconnection of optimism and hope. Given the long history of oppression and exploitation of black lives, and coloured lives, in the USA there is indeed great need for optimism and hope. Yet this international social movement is an optimistic calculated risk – protesters hope that this is the time to redress the social injustices experienced by all people of colour in western societies, despite health risks. God may or may not be involved in the minds of protesters – the social justice issues actually transcend all religious optimism and hope.

The universality of hope and its connection to optimism notwithstanding, contemporary social movements epitomise an optimism that has become second nature in public life. Arguably, optimism

has become a cultural default setting both for those seeking change, and for defenders of existing social order. Yet as we see, optimism is a two edged sword. As well as being a great motivator of progressive change, optimism can cause blindness to unwelcome truths, and unhealthy complacency. Or even worse, optimism can lead to fraud, lies and deception.

Defining Optimism

Optimism was defined in the last essay on this website ('Optimism?', March, 2020) as a positive attitude of mind that leads to hope. Optimism, it was argued, should be mediated by reason, and preferably, evidence-based reason. This would be 'best practice' – which is often at odds with the pronouncements of politicians, lobbyists, journalists and advertisers. Optimism is however more of a problem than may be at first apparent. As I argue, there are deep problems that result from the modern syndrome of 'cultural optimism'. At the same time, a certain level of optimism is definitely life affirming. And further, all life requires some hope. The issue is where we draw the line.

The definition suggested above enables the separation of optimism from hope. The two are not synonymous – as the cultural critic Terry Eagleton reminds us with his book title, it is possible to be hopeful 'without optimism'. Hope is part of the human condition; optimism is optional. Further, hope is normally object oriented: in the sense of hoping for something. Optimism is more insidious, a warm blanketing feeling that can be in denial of 'the facts' as revealed by experts, and even more insidiously, is an attitude that takes confidence from the assumption that the future can be moulded and even created despite contrary facts. Indeed, optimism has become the key ingredient of all spin and hyperbole. There is nothing that is immune from this inane cheerfulness. Hope is much less problematic and far more universal in being, arguably, the primary motivator all human action.

Optimism in action

At all times politicians makes optimistic promises; digital and print media tell us stories we want to hear; advertisers make big claims; doctors, lawyers and architects are upbeat about our chances. Life so often proceeds 'on a wing and a prayer'. From the cradle to the grave in modern times everybody is immersed in optimism, whether they like it or not, whatever their individual circumstances, and notwithstanding pessimistic ideas to the contrary.

But this immersion in optimism is not emotionally straightforward. In an apparently contradictory move media have for many decades, and probably longer, been casting 'crisis' headlines – typically around crime, motor vehicle accidents, homelessness, and other social justice issues (and possibly now more about racial discrimination and sexual abuse). The desired effects of this style of attention seeking reportage are to promote anxiety, advertising consumption, and the need for follow-up reporting. Arguably however, 'crisis' reporting is still optimistic – it is rarely overtly pessimistic – but it is nonetheless emotionally fraught. Although crisis reporting usually implies something positive about the possibility of redress, such optimism doesn't necessarily deliver us to a happier place immediately. Optimism is hopeful. But we have to wait.

The main assumption of this essay is that optimism finds its way into our lives as part of a mixture of emotions, and therefore becomes an attitude of mind that is not easy, or simple, to diagnose. In most of our lives optimism is part of a complex emotional field including pessimism, anxiety, grief, shame, joy and anger among other attitudes, emotions and feelings. These emotions and feelings are aroused as a consequence of daily life experiences, the social structures and processes that produce them and us, and the emotional predispositions with which we are born. This is a very complex field to analyse, but optimism

has become inserted into most professionally mediated discourses as a fuzzy scaffolding that can prevent bad outcomes. Pessimistic thoughts and feelings can, admittedly, steer outcomes in the wrong direction, but optimism is not necessarily the answer. Facts and evidence should prevail.

Optimism is a neglected force in contemporary life and culture. Too much optimism has led to unwarranted faith in new untried and unlegislated technologies, and denial of ecological crises, climate change and health risks - naming just a few prominent outcomes. Undeniably, politicians are the greatest offenders – political discourse is naturally optimistic, and mass audiences have become addicted to positive outcomes.

Despite the complex ways in which optimism enters our lives, the main contention of this essay is much simpler: the extent to which optimism sustains us may not always be clear, but optimism is usually there. Optimism has become a driving force in all our lives, often despite any contrary facts. This particularly suits politicians and the media, who would sweep us along on a tide of hope for the future. Consumer society is also inspired by optimism. Happy consumers litigate less and generally consume more. Advertisers depend on optimism. Health and wellbeing are also optimistic attitudes, desirable as these outcomes may be. Technological change depends upon optimism – despite a long history of disastrous and unlegislated outcomes.

In the final analysis more needs to be said about hope, the inevitable outcome of optimism. Optimism is, it turns out, relatively easy to critique, as this essay should reveal. Hope is another matter, and will form the subject of a later essay. Perhaps the title of Terry Eagleton's book on the subject makes the point: *Hope without Optimism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015). Unfortunately, this book is flawed by covertly religious assumptions and an over-reliance on 'high culture' to diagnose the banality of optimism and hope. English literature and European religion are hardly the most reliable sources of knowledge about hope and optimism. Indeed, East and West, religion and priests have always traded on the basic human need for hope and, over aeons, coded religion deeply into all hope. Most people alive today still hope for divine intervention in the various global crises we face. Science is still not determining outcomes for solving pandemics, climate change, over-consumption, over-population and most other major crises. The subjects of hope and the apparently crazy things people hope for go well beyond the scope of this essay, and it should be said, beyond the scope of Terry Eagleton's over-erudite book.

First we need to better understand optimism, because too much optimism has quite disrupted the idea of hoping for sensible things. Today the fields of hope are dominated by advertisers and spin merchants of all kinds with the effect that most crises are either deferred or ignored until 'disaster management' becomes the best remaining strategy. In the USA, Brazil, and many other countries this appears to be true of methods for the management of the current pandemic; our ongoing ecological crisis is a much more developed case. Other related crises such as over-consumption, over-population, and the idea of endless growth, hardly register at all in popular media and government policy-making. We may never get over the optimism required to sustain the fantasies underlying each of these crises.

Whatever, even though it may be possible to decide to be less optimistic, hope is unavoidable and indispensable. Hope is a cultural universal, but the same cannot be said of optimism.

'Cultural Optimism': historical background

Long before media had become such a dominant cultural force, the famous French Enlightenment philosopher Voltaire wrote a classic treatise on the subject of optimism. His book, *Candide*, was published in 1759. This book was a rejection of Leibniz's earlier theologically based argument that we live in 'the best of possible worlds' (*Essays of Theodicy on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man and the Origin of*

Evil, 1710). Modern commentators have described Leibniz's argument as too optimistic in the context of great human suffering (e.g. Wikipedia) - but it is important to realise that Leibniz did not see his argument as 'optimistic', indeed to my knowledge he did not use the word at all.

Nonetheless, by 1759 the supremely optimistic idea that we always live 'in the best of possible worlds' could be seen as a ridiculous argument. Since then, optimism has become a cultural feature of western modernity - as opposed to hope, which has always been present as part of religious worldviews. The cultural value of optimism has not been so constant.

It is not easy to be definitive about feelings and emotions over long periods of time. However, based upon the writing that we have inherited - published works, diaries, journals, letters and notes of various kinds - some generalisations can be made. It is also sensible to place any generalisations about feelings, emotions and meanings in the context of social developments at the time. New technologies and the idea of 'progress', for instance, invite speculation about hopes and fears, optimism and pessimism; the impact of the industrial revolution on Western European art, literature and philosophy was profound and is reflected in the feelings, thoughts and emotions of all those involved. Optimism and pessimism certainly arose in those social contexts.

In other words, there appears to be a relationship between social conditions and the thoughts feelings, emotions and writings of individual members of any society. We might assume, therefore, that the word 'optimism' required appropriate social conditions for conversations about optimism, or conversations using the word, to have been likely.

It appears that prior to the work of Leibniz, and then later Voltaire, the use of the word 'optimism' was very limited; unlike the word 'hope'. According to *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English* (London, 1964), optimism is the 'doctrine, esp. as set forth by the philosopher and mathematician [Gottfried Wilhelm] Leibniz, that the actual world is the best of all possible worlds'. Perhaps mass circumstances prior to those times (the mid to late 1600's in Western Europe) just did not facilitate the need for a word like 'optimism'.

Where and when the word has its origins is hard to establish beyond the defining statements in dictionaries (which refer to French and Latin origins). It is interesting that the words 'optimism', 'pessimism' and 'hope' do not appear in the index of the cultural historian Raymond Williams' classic text *Keywords: a vocabulary of culture and society* (London: Fontana Paperbacks, 1976). Perhaps he thought them all too emotionally based, and probably too banal to be worth thematic mention. We do know however that Williams actually thought optimism to be part of ruling class culture and therefore in need of debunking, as a matter of priority. The more contemporary cultural critic Terry Eagleton points this out (Eagleton, *op. cit.*, p. 4) and has usefully traced the term back to the eighteenth century, where 'optimalism' was an earlier and 'more optimistic' usage. We can assume this Leibnizian construction morphed into 'optimism', and then became tangled up with doctrines of progress (and as Eagleton puts it, with ideological 'Progress').

Today, western politicians are particularly likely to use optimism as a binding cultural narrative. In modern times the notional combination of freedom and innovation is inherently optimistic about change and reform. Sadly however, it has taken a global pandemic to show just how deadly the deceptions of political optimism can be. How many political leaders promised the gullible that deaths from the Covid 19 pandemic would be all over by Easter? Voltaire would probably smile.

Even though it is well known to psychologists and economists today that people are (everywhere) great optimists this was not always clear. Prior to about 1979 optimism and pessimism were not portrayed in a positive light by academics, or intellectuals, wherever located. So although people may have been generally optimistic about their prospects in modern societies, their optimism may have been regarded

by academics as merely emotional, without the support of reasoned analysis. Today, however, emotionally based optimism is quite the required thing. Optimism is good for one's health (eg. Scioli et. al. *Psychological Reports*, 1997, 81, 723-733, available online), and business outcomes, and of course, if you are a believer, for one's salvation. How quickly times have changed.

This surmise about originally negative perceptions is easily supported by historical evidence. Voltaire started by satirising optimism. In the following century negative views of optimism (and hope) were present in Western Europe, even though industrial change might be thought to be a source of optimism. For example, Scioli et. al. (op. cit.) quotes the philosopher Nietzsche 'hope is the worst of all evils for it prolongs the torment of man' – we could easily substitute the word optimism for hope here. Karl Marx was another sceptic regarding religious claims; he also thought capitalism was a source of misery for the working classes: nonetheless he was optimistic about the inevitability of a worldwide revolution: 'The working classes will rise up and cast off their chains' (Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Communist Manifesto*, 1846). Perhaps this illustrates the thesis that the hope of Marxists for a better future is hardly different from a religious hope for redemption and a second coming. The basic emotional mechanism in both cases is optimism and hope – but both terribly skewed by excessive optimism, even if there was not a word for the orientation prior to the seventeenth or eighteenth century in Western Europe.

However, by the early twentieth century psychology's founding father Sigmund Freud was able to cast optimism as 'illusory denial' – we might surmise that 'denial' is also inextricably entwined with optimism and hope. We might further speculate that Freudian psychology, unlike Marxism and contemporary popular culture, has managed to retain a healthy relationship with pessimism – even if psychologists do need reminding that there is nothing like a good dose of clinical realism.

Nearly a century later, in 1979, Lionel Tiger commenced major academic pushback against negative perceptions by casting optimism as the 'biology of hope': optimism is one of our 'most defining and adaptive characteristics' (*Optimism: the biology of hope*, Simon and Schuster, Inc.). This recasting did not achieve universal acclaim. As late as 1984 the economist John Hey thought conventional wisdom still thought 'optimism and pessimism are irrational emotions' – and that most theoretical economists would say optimism and pessimism were 'unfit to be incorporated into any theory of rational behaviour'. Hey hoped to redress that situation with a good dose of econometrics ('The Economics of Optimism and Pessimism', <http://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6435.1984.tb00748.x>). But the tide was turning among academics, led (unsurprisingly) by psychologists – who in post-Freudian times have become quite addicted to cheerfulness. By 2006 the psychologist Suzanne Segerstrom had found as many as 80% of people were optimists (*Breaking Murphy's Law*, New York, Guildford), and in 2009 psychologist Fiona Parasher declared the subject to be a new boom area of study: 'There have been more studies of optimism in the last 7 years than in the previous decade' ('The Psychology of Optimism and Pessimism: Theories and Research Findings', *Positive Psychology.org.uk*, 2009–10–24). Today psychologists see different categories of optimism and pessimism such as 'dispositional optimism', 'learned optimism' and 'unrealistic optimism'. Psychologists and health workers endorse optimism as a productive and life enhancing attitude. Conversely pessimism is seen as a negative force in people's lives. Perhaps this is a simplistic approach, and following Freud's suggestion, optimism can be illusory, and, as suggested by some Marxists, highly ideological – this is particularly evident in the current pandemic. Furthermore, it seems likely that optimism is an emotional and ideological cause of climate change denial, and probably also a cause of over-consumption, over-population and even commitment to models of economic growth. All these processes of decline are doubtless aided and abetted by great lashings of optimism. In summary, as argued in this essay, our current civilizational decline – particularly our ecological decline – is a result of too much optimism by ruling elites, the media and the masses. Cynical manipulation and mindless cheerfulness may yet be the death of us all.

One might wonder what great cultural shift occurred after about 1979 that made optimism so much more prominent and popular. Perhaps advertisers and economists had been able to persuade consumers that optimism was good for the economy, and pessimism was a downer; perhaps politicians agreed. Indeed, participants in 'youth culture', counter-culture and various social movements of the sixties and seventies were all maturing into consumers (despite Timothy Leary's admonitions to 'tune in, turn off and drop out', the poetry of Allen Ginsberg, and recognition that 'the personal is political'). While social movement activists achieved much that one might see as optimistic (the civil rights movement, the women's movement, the labour movement, the counterculture) we can today see that these social and cultural shifts as still optimistically aspirational. In the light of a globally declining ecology, it is hard to remain optimistic today.

Other outbursts of optimism after WW2, included post war reconstruction, the election of John F Kennedy as president of the USA in 1960, and later the withdrawal of the USA from the Vietnam War. This post WW2 period was probably a watershed of western optimism, blighted by the 'cold war' and the threat of a nuclear Armageddon, but buoyantly optimistic about the prospects of continual economic growth in a limitless ecology. How times have changed.

The Trump Phenomenon

The affect of religion on the public's appetite for optimism cannot be underestimated. For instance in the USA evangelical Christians continue to provide an eager market. When the North American evangelical Christian Norman Vincent Peale published *The Power of Positive Thinking* in 1952 the book remained a best seller for over 3 years (see, for example, Gwenda Blair 'How Norman Vincent Peale Taught Donald Trump to Worship Himself', October 06, 2015, online). In Peale's own words

'The positive thinker . . . constantly sends out positive thoughts, together with vital mental images of hope, optimism and creativity. He therefore activates the world around him positively and strongly tends to draw back to himself positive results. This too is a basic law of mind action' (N. V. Peale, *The Positive Principle Today*, Simon and Schuster, 2007, p.9).

Donald Trump was among the early adherents to this particularly upbeat view of decision making. Indeed the Trump phenomenon is very likely an outcome of the Reverend Peale's proselytising of the power of optimism. Trump's uncanny ability to survive sex scandals, political interference, and even impeachment trials, is a good example of the power of this kind of magical thinking in modern times. While the Clintons failed miserably to avoid the fall out of scandal Trump has merely gone from strength to strength.

The Grim Truth

Today we are all waiting to see whether the optimism required for economic recovery fuelled by endless economic growth is realistic. In Australia and New Zealand house prices have risen, indicating economies that remain relatively buoyant, despite rising unemployment and the need for government intervention in the form of subsidies. This economic buoyancy is not matched globally where rates of Covid 19 infection are generally much higher and health systems struggle to keep up with demand. Nonetheless, economic forecasts are for economic growth, albeit at a slower rate of increase, well into the next decade. These predictions include allowance for the effects of climate change and declining ecologies.

Although many countries reported negative rates of growth in 2020, a global pandemic does not appear likely to over-dampen expectations for 2022 and beyond. According to the World Bank, the pandemic is likely to be associated with a slow down in growth over the next decades: 'the global economic outlook will remain below pre-pandemic trends for a long time.' (www.worldbank.org, 'Global Economic Prospects',

27 February, 2021). Nonetheless, global economic growth is predicted to be of the order of 4% in 2022. According to economists then, there is nothing much to see here.

One would expect economists to make these kinds of predictions. After all, they do not price in 'externalities', such as declining ecologies. Nor do they think about any declining quality of life – even 'happiness' indicators that appear are strongly tied to costs of living and do not factor in the extinction of non human species, and the degradation of 'commons' that we all share such as oceans, rivers and atmospheres.

In short, the prospect of future economic decline, fuelled by ecological decline, still remain pretty much unthinkable – particularly so for optimistically dependent politicians. Just as the frog in the pot remains oblivious to a slow increase in temperature, so too the human species seems well capable of adapting to a slowly declining natural world. Optimism and hope are definitely at play with denial here.

We should remember that the ecological realities of a warming planet are manifesting already - overwhelmed by the human tragedies of droughts, fires, pandemics, economic recessions and continual warfare, but an ongoing existential crisis, nonetheless. It is hard to remain a mindless optimist in such a crisis-ridden scenario. The famous naturalist and broadcaster Sir David Attenborough certainly agrees (See 'It's too late', *Global Outlook*, online, 26 February, 2021).

In Australia, a continent wide drought followed by a season of bushfires and then a pandemic and then an economic crisis may well be just the beginning of a new era of 'crisis management'. This is a global prognosis because Australia is not the only canary in a coalmine. In that terrible context the cultural role of optimism needs decoding more than ever. As dire as circumstances may become, there are good reasons to doubt the ability of populations everywhere to respond adequately. There are many factors at play here – over-population, an insatiable need for economic growth, ecological devastation, the great reluctance of capitalist democracies to intervene in the operation of 'free' markets, and force-feeding all of these social and cultural realities: optimism. Obviously, optimism is not just a problem during a pandemic - it will also be disastrous in an era of crisis management, when sober realism will be absolutely necessary. Unfortunately, optimism is embedded in the thinking of all professionals – particularly so in the self-interested posturing of politicians who are always trying to preserve their popularity.

However, could it be that every cloud has a silver lining? Could optimism be just the tonic required as the species spirals ever closer to terminal tipping points? For instance, the confrontations of optimism and medical reality in this current pandemic may well be transformative. Perhaps social distancing will revolutionise hygienic practices. Perhaps our carbon footprint will remain lower as more people work from home and resist the urge to fly to meetings. Possibly the great value of scientific knowledge will become better appreciated as a result of this pandemic. Perhaps people will have fewer children as a consequence of an economic downturn. It may be good to retain some hope, and indeed, some optimism.

Universal optimism

Unfortunately, worse than any individual excess, optimism remains as an unrecognised viral condition in western cultures. We may recognise the folly of individual optimism, particularly as the death toll from a global pandemic rises in so many countries, but we do not recognise the way that optimism drives all professional cultures, and the media, as the main ingredient of an absurd 'common sense'. It is one thing to hope for the best, but suicidal to allow government policy to remain optimistic to the point of disaster management. Yet that is what voting populations have encouraged in the past, and that is what we might reasonably expect voters to continue to do. Right wing populism and selfish individualism are a deadly combination in a 'post truth', post-Trump era.

Failure to recognise the existential threat that climate change presents is probably the best example of the ease with which politicians can hoodwink the masses with unfounded optimism. But it is not entirely fair to lay all the blame on politicians. Optimism is deeply encoded in the reasoning and methodology of all specialist cultural fields. Apart from Winston Churchill, how many politicians have won office by being realistic? Even scientists have to be optimistic to secure funding.

Evidence to support the claim of professional optimism being endemic in climate change literature was presented in *Beyond the Limits: A Planet in Crisis* (Tom Jagtenberg, Cilento Publishing, 2015 – see Chapter 3, ‘Professional Optimism’), but the need for in depth research is ongoing. One can go further. It seems that optimism has become wedded to the ceaseless quest for novelty in cultural modernity. The things that drive us forward all require optimism. Technological innovation, new research findings, new commodities, new markets, population growth, and endless economic growth all require their many champions to be upbeat. The first thing that every neophyte in every profession learns, somehow, is that survival as an employee depends upon optimism. There may be no escape from ‘cultural optimism’.

The great irony is that scientific knowledge is our best defence against mindless optimism. Today it is medical science and epidemiology that confronts the self-interested optimism of a Donald Trump or a Jaire Bolsonaro, and the optimistic determination of economists, bankers and most working people to avoid another recession. Scientific evidence is still the gold standard in types of evidence. Even economic evidence is better than the self-interested ramblings of a Donald Trump – even evidence that tries to factor in future states of ‘imperfect’ market places is better than self-interested individual opinion. During a global pandemic, sober and clinical facts are far more life affirming than colourful and carefree opinions, whether they be fully scientific, or even economic.

Nonetheless, in declining economies optimism is not always absurd – far from it. Continuing optimism is vitally necessary for the existence of any economy – people must continue to work, and hope to work. It is optimism that denies science and common sense realism and leads to disastrous outcomes. It follows that optimism and realism are not necessarily at odds; it remains to be explained why it is that scientific knowledge can be so ignored by so many, why is it that so many prefer careless and reckless optimism to sober and clinical facts. There are many possible explanations for that, including cynicism and boredom, but optimism remains a culprit. Indeed, excessive optimism may have become a modern ‘opium of the people’ – to match alcohol, sugar, fat and salt among other dietary habits. All contribute to a state of awareness that some have called ‘unconscious’, others ‘semi-consciousness’, others ‘false consciousness’ and ‘alienation’, and others ‘silent resistance’. Whatever, optimism has a role to play in all of these conditions of mind (and society).

It is noteworthy that even the ‘critical analysis’ of social theorists suffers from an analytical neglect of the cultural role of optimism. That is, looking to academic experts for advice about the cultural role of optimism is not likely to yield many results – for the good and sufficient reason that academics are themselves required to be professionally optimistic. Naysayers will not survive long. All commodities, like education are built on optimistic foundations. Only the downturn in foreign fee paying student numbers forced by a pandemic can sour the optimism of vice chancellors and other senior academic managers. Otherwise it’s business as usual. Everybody smile. Do remain optimistic. At all times. Don’t scare the horses.

Conclusions

Optimism during a pandemic needs to be mediated by realism about reasonable risks to health as opposed to the need for economic survival. Too much optimism can be very bad for public health and a functioning economy – as demonstrated by the absurd posturing of so many political leaders and the consequential behaviours of compliant public servants and gullible audiences.

Optimism is deeply imbedded in our culture. For example, the belief that new technology and a more caring society can save us from the follies of over-consumption and over-population is very optimistic.

It is more likely that new technology will continue to articulate into over-consumption and over-population. It is more likely that the gap between rich and poor will continue to increase as we progress into a dystopian future. Over-optimism about the powers of new technologies will guarantee a declining global ecology and declining standards of living for very large numbers of people in all countries.

Tom Jagtenberg

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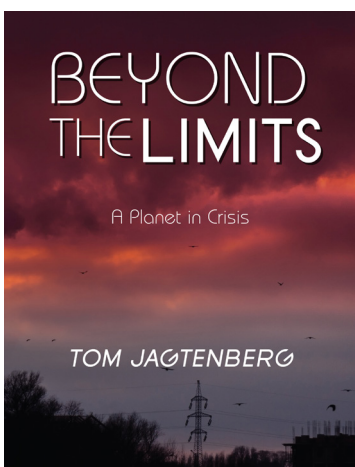
About Tom Jagtenberg

Tom has a longtime interest in the natural world and concern about its decline. His interests, whilst being inter-disciplinary, have always had a focus on nature and the environment.

He worked as a sociologist for thirty years at Wollongong University (where he was a Senior Lecturer) and Southern Cross University (where he was an adjunct research fellow). He is a published author of books and articles about the environment and related cultural fields. Tom has qualifications in science, engineering and sociology – a BE (Chemical and Fuel Engineering, Hons 1, UNSW), an MSc (Liberal Studies in Science, Manchester University) and a PhD (Sociology, University of Wollongong).

Since Tom's student days he has been concerned with the representation of nature in disciplinary fields as diverse as science, sociology, cultural studies and communication studies, natural medicine and political life. He has been a strong critic of the exclusion of non-human interests from academic fields and political parties. As his latest book suggests even Green political parties are limited in the extent to which they can be advocates for other species, their habitats, and even human environments.

Tom retired from academic life to live in Northern New South Wales with his partner. They chose the Northern Rivers region because of its strong ecologically focused community and beautiful environment.



Beyond the Limits

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No matter how hard politicians try to broker agreements about curbing greenhouse gas emissions there are deeper obstacles that would seem to guarantee Planet Earth's ecological decline.

Beyond the Limits is a hard-hitting and probing analysis of the underlying problems that define the possibilities of any response to the problem of climate change.

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