

The Preoccupation with Doom

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In past ages there were always doomsayers amongst us. We would be punished for this or that sin, the messiah was coming, the apocalypse is near. These sentiments are old. But now there is something new: we are all doomsayers now.

It is difficult to find anyone at present who is genuinely optimistic about the future. By "genuinely optimistic", I mean, one who is informed as to the facts, yet believes that the human race is likely to improve constantly, meet all its impending challenges, to survive and prosper, peacefully, for centuries, for millennia, to come.

They exist, to be sure, but they are miniscule. In our culture, such sentiments are nowhere to be found. Not in literature: no, they are full of dark images of the future, of dystopias, of security states out of control, of post-apocalyptic visions. Not in music: even commercial pop is not optimistic, just marketing targeting insecure teenagers in the present. Not on television: positive images of the future are rather quaint now, paradoxically. Space science fiction continues, but is too far removed from earthly experience to have any real impact - but even that is dark now. Fantastic visions of magical technology are something left to B-grade movies of a past era. Even corporate-sponsored rock concerts which once inspired some of us now leave us unmoved and cynical as to their motives. There is a sense that everything is broken. There is a sense of dark clouds gathering on the horizon, whether from war, global warming, economic globalization, famine, or disease. There is a future of teeming populations clamouring for limited resources. There is the end of oil. There is the gleaming metal and charred bodies of aggressive war. There is the scourge of terrorism. And there is, above all, amongst those who are not delusional, the inevitability of global climate change. It is not a pretty picture, it is one of doom, slow or fast, and at least as regards global warming, it is not even one of heroic tragedy. As George Monbiot put it:

When terrorists threaten us, it shows that we must count for something, that we are important enough to kill. They confirm the grand narrative of our lives, in which we strive through thickets of good and evil towards an ultimate purpose. But there is no glory in the threat of climate change. The story it tells us is of yeast in a barrel, feeding and farting until they are poisoned by their own waste. It is too squalid an ending for our anthropocentric conceit to accept.

(George Monbiot, Mocking Our Dreams,
<http://www.monbiot.com/archives/2005/02/15/mocking-our-dreams/>)

And we find it very difficult to fend off the difficulties in arguing for a positive future. These are problems on a scale that we find difficult to imagine, let alone address, let alone solve. To some extent they seem hard-wired into the future, scientifically unavoidable. Oil is obviously finite, and oil executives' opinions aside, it must therefore run out. The planet's resources are finite; so to survive indefinitely, humanity must survive off ecological "interest", not "capital" - but we are depleting the capital, irreversibly, right now, and not giving a damn about the consequences. The clashing nations of the world seem unable to avoid war and suffering now, just as they seemed a century ago. The threat of terrorism has always existed, but now it can strike the rich, it can hit everything, the governments of the world are doing everything they can to provoke it, and who knows if it will go nuclear. There is no solution in sight. Putting these, and more, together, a genuine optimist must argue against all of them, simultaneously.

All the structures of which our lives are built - the comfortable affluence of the Western middle-class, the toil of the global South, global markets, national political systems - all of these are built on shaky, exploitative, unjust, environmentally untenable foundations. They will, in all likelihood, collapse. What happens if oil prices skyrocket, if transport becomes impossible, if water supplies deplete, if (or rather when) the polar ice caps melt? Economies collapse, we are reduced to somewhere between poverty and famine. The most likely proposed solutions would then be various forms of authoritarianism. War breaks out, as it then must. The population cannot be sustained, and will be reduced, with trauma on the scale of thousands of millions of lives.

The future of civilization is quite possibly this bleak.

The best the human race can hope for is to go out with the sun. That is well out of our contemplation - a thousand years of technological civilization is enough, we would think, to assure such semi-immortality for the species, or whatever better species might evolve out of us. The next century or two, indeed, will probably be enough to see out the greatest threats the human race has ever faced. By then the course of global warming will be clear. By then we will be out of oil. By then all the potential nooses around our collective necks will have been tightened. That may be the end. We may come out mauled but ruined, depleted, and back to the dark ages, to have another shot at advanced civilization some centuries hence, or after the next ice age. Whether we can slip out of our nooses is a doubtful prospect. If we can, however, the optimists will most likely have been proven right.

And so I have found among many people a sort of resignation. People are prone to ask, in very general and vague terms, "will humans survive?", "are we all doomed?", just as I am discussing now. But what I find concerning is just how pessimistic people are. Not just a sober evaluation of the probabilities of future events. There is also a nihilism, or a carelessness, that goes with it. There is nothing we can do about - or at least, there is nothing I can do about

it. So, various deductions can then be made. We could enjoy ourselves in the meantime, celebrate the twilight of our species while we choke in our own global vomit. Or, we could bemoan and bewail our tragic status as a helpless infant species whom fate and science have probably condemned to an early death in an uncaring universe. Or, and this is the most likely response in practice, we will just go about our daily lives as we always have and make no change.

But further, I have found among some people more than just resignation: almost a sense of desert. I have heard people, albeit semi-jokingly, express some satisfaction with the prospect of massive epidemics, that we are going to go out before the sun, and so (it seems) we may as well not prolong our misery. I have heard people argue with conviction, within the discussion of this factual pessimism, a normative tone. Not only is it likely, not only is it our fate, it is the only outcome, it is the natural outcome, it is the appropriate outcome. I find this of deep concern. I would have thought that if anything would shake people out of their collective slumber to do something, it would be the oncoming end of the world! But apparently, for many people - especially among those who are predisposed to think about these matters - there is the sense that we are all going to die out, and we don't really care, and we probably deserve it.

Einstein once made a comment on this phenomenon. This was in 1949, supposedly a far more optimistic era.

In order to illustrate my meaning, let me record here a personal experience. I recently discussed with an intelligent and well-disposed man the threat of another war, which in my opinion would seriously endanger the existence of mankind, and I remarked that only a supra-national organization would offer protection from that danger. Thereupon my visitor, very calmly and coolly, said to me: "Why are you so deeply opposed to the disappearance of the human race?"

I am sure that as little as a century ago no one would have so lightly made a statement of this kind. It is the statement of a man who has striven in vain to attain an equilibrium within himself and has more or less lost hope of succeeding. It is the expression of a painful solitude and isolation from which so many people are suffering in these days. What is the cause? Is there a way out?

It is easy to raise such questions, but difficult to answer them with any degree of assurance. I must try, however, as best I can, although I am very conscious of the fact that our feelings and strivings are often contradictory and obscure and that they cannot be expressed in easy and simple formulas.

(Albert Einstein, Why Socialism?
<http://www.monthlyreview.org/598einst.htm>)

We, also, must strive to answer these questions, I would say, and also with no real prospect of assurance.

(By the way, in a sentence, Einstein's answer to these questions was: "The economic anarchy of capitalist society as it exists today is, in my opinion, the

real source of the evil.” Read the rest if you want, from the first issue of the Monthly Review, following the link above.)

But, asking questions only at this level is dramatic, perhaps interesting to talk about for a little while, but so general that basically nothing can be said. We can investigate the facts further, but their general tenor is clear. The question then arises, what should we do in response?

The matter is open to argument, but I would have thought it not a difficult one. Einstein’s approach seems to be clearly right. If any of us are not moved by the prospect of seeing all of our families, friends, relatives, countrymen, fellow human beings, all of our descendants, and all of the potential human beings ever to live - then that is a sign that something is deeply wrong, either in our culture, or in our psychology, or in our way of life. Something is broken - not only is everything broken, we are broken too. If this attitude prevails, we will go out long before the sun. Our species will quit the universe as meaninglessly as it entered, having achieved a century of brilliance that spread a cancer over the planet and, having consumed it, choked, poisoned and starved itself to death.

Why such attitudes persist is a question we need to ask. I do not propose to answer it here. But the question of the proper attitude to take is a much simpler one. And although the prospects for the future look pretty bad, the question is whether we should resign ourselves or try to change it. To resign ourselves is the worst possible course we can take: it is the surest way to bring about the worst case scenario. Such a course entrenches the status quo, leaving existing power structures such as national governments to deal with the problems as they do now. And, at present, they deal with the problems horribly badly, ineffectually, and with unimaginable selfishness and disregard. Who would have thought a few countries could gobble up the goods, the work, and the energy of the world? Somehow we have an economic system which facilitates this, and a political system of nation states which makes it possible to tolerate. But it is intolerable, and it needs to change if we are to have a chance.

What to do is a difficult question, but the question of whether we should try to do something is easy. So I think the answer - which doesn’t say much, since the question doesn’t ask much - is pretty obvious. Antonio Gramsci summed it up as ”pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will”. For those sincerely concerned with the future, which should be all of us, and all of us who want to see fundamental social change, it is the only practical philosophy open to us, if we are to retain a grip on reality, and avoid falling into depression, inaction, and the certainty of a future worse than the present. But a bleak assessment of the future and a seeming impossibility of altering it is nothing new: it has been the case for centuries. The only difference in the present is the magnitude of the consequences. We cannot afford to falter now.