

IDEAS

Chicken Littles Are Ruining America

Doomsaying can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

By David Brooks



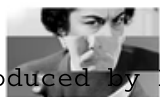
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SOMETIME AROUND 1970, the American personality changed. In prior decades, people tended to define themselves according to the social roles they played: I'm a farmer, teacher, housewife, priest. But then a more individualistic culture took over. The University of Michigan psychologist Joseph Veroff and his colleagues compared national surveys conducted in 1957 and 1976 and found a significant shift in people's self-definition: A communal, "socially integrated" mindset was being replaced with a "personal or individuated" mindset. The right-wing version of this individualism (which emphasized economic freedom) and the left-wing version (which emphasized lifestyle freedom) were different, but it was individual freedom all the way down. This culture of expressive individualism hit a kind of apotheosis with a 1997 cover story in *Fast Company* headlined "The Brand Called You," in which Tom Peters, the leading management guru of the day, declared that "we are CEOs of our own companies: Me Inc."

But cultural change tends to have a pendulum-style rhythm, and we are now at the dawn of another collective phase. Unfortunately, this new culture of communalism has got some big problems.

Twenty-first-century communalism is a peculiar kind of communalism. For starters, it's very socially conscious and political. Whether you're on the MAGA right or the social-justice left, you define your identity by how you stand against what you perceive to be the dominant structures of society. Groups on each side of the political divide are held together less by common affections than by a common sense of threat, an experience of collective oppression. Today's communal culture is based on a shared belief that society is broken, systems are rotten, the game is rigged, injustice prevails, the venal elites are out to get us; we find solidarity and meaning in resisting their oppression together. Again, there is a right-wing version (Donald Trump's "I am your retribution") and a left-wing version (the intersectional community of oppressed groups), but what they share is an us-versus-them Manichaeism. The culture war gives life shape and meaning.

Social scientists have had to come up with new phrases to capture this set of cultural attitudes and practices. In 2015, Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff identified “vindictive protectiveness,” which is what happens when an online mob rallies together to punish a perceived threat from an oppressor. Henrique Carvalho and Anastasia Chamberlen developed the concept of “hostile solidarity” to describe the ways that retaliatory action binds people against their foes. This mode of collectivism embeds us in communities—but they’re not friendly communities; they’re angry ones.

From the September 2015 issue: The coddling of the American mind

In this culture, people feel bonded not because they are cooperating with one another but because they are indignant about the same things. Consider the word *woke*, which has been so politicized, and has been used in so many sloppy ways, that it has outlived its usefulness. But when it entered the mainstream—sometime between 2008 and 2013—it suggested that you could enter the circle of the enlightened, the inner ring of social belonging, simply by adopting a mode of awareness. To be woke was to perceive the world in a certain way, to understand how terrible everything is. You established solidarity by demonstrating that you were enlightened enough to see the pervasive rottenness of things.

In this way, pessimism becomes a membership badge—the ultimate sign that you are on the side of the good. If your analysis is not apocalyptic, you’re naive, lacking in moral urgency, complicit with the status quo.

This culture has produced a succession of prophets of doom across the ideological spectrum, people who established their moral courage by portraying the situation as negatively as possible. In 2016, the conservative speechwriter Michael Anton unified the Trumpian right with his “The Flight 93 Election” essay, which argued that desperate measures must be taken to keep America from crashing to its ruin. Trump followed up with his “American carnage” inaugural address, depicting the country as a chaotic dystopia. Quotidian catastrophizing has become a staple of Republican discourse. Here, for example, is a transcript of a video that a U.S. representative sent out to his supporters last July 4:

Hey guys, Congressman Andy Ogles here, wishing you a happy and blessed Fourth of July. Hey, remember our Founding Fathers. It's we the people who are in charge of this country, not a leftist minority. Look, the left is trying to destroy our country and our family, and they are coming after you. Have a blessed Fourth of July. Be safe. Have fun. God Bless America.

In other words: *The left is coming after you to destroy your family! Enjoy the hot dogs.*

But a pessimism just as pervasive reigns on the left. The upbeat ethos of Barack Obama and Lin-Manuel Miranda—in which racial progress was seen as slow but steady—gave way to the intractable pessimism of Ta-Nehisi Coates and the critical race theorists. Extreme pessimism is now the go-to conversational stance. This tweet from *The Washington Post's* Taylor Lorenz captures the vibe: “People are like ‘why are kids so depressed? It must be their PHONES!’ But never mention that fact that we’re living in a late stage capitalist hellscape during an ongoing deadly pandemic [with] record wealth inequality, 0 social safety net/job security, as climate change cooks the world.”

This deep sense of pessimism has become more and more predominant, especially among the young. Since about 2004, the share of American 12th graders who say it is “hard to have hope for the world” has been surging, according to surveys by Monitoring the Future, which has tracked the attitudes of high schoolers since 1975. There's also been a rise in 12th graders who agree with the statement “Every time I try

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to get ahead, something or somebody stops me.” Since 2012, the share of 12th graders who expect to get a graduate degree or a professional job has plummeted.

The prevailing culture nurtures these attitudes. But there is a giant gap between many of these negative perceptions and actual reality. For example, since the mid-1970s the number of women who have earned college degrees and graduate degrees, and taken leadership positions in society, has risen dramatically; women’s wages are also much higher than in previous generations. Yet, as the psychologist Jean Twenge shows in her book *Generations*, teenage girls today are more likely than teenage girls in the ’70s to believe that women are discriminated against. Surely that’s partly because successive waves of feminism have raised women’s awareness of ongoing discrimination. But women are doing meaningfully better by these measures, and yet young women are feeling worse.

Many years ago, I auditioned to be a co-host of the CNN show *Crossfire*. Before the audition, one of the producers pulled me aside and told me that the key to the show was not what you say. No, the key to the show, I was told, was that you must wear a look of indignant rage as the other person is talking. That look of contemptuous fury, which the cameras featured in close-up shots, was what powered the show and kept viewers hooked. In the decades since, Tucker Carlson, who was a *Crossfire* co-host, has ridden that look—mouth pursed, eyes narrowed, eyebrows furrowed—to fame and fortune. With a single expression, he communicates that “they” are screwing the country and that “we” need to be outraged. Tucker happens to be on the right, but millions of people on both the left and the right now look at the world through a distorting lens like his.

THE CURRENT CULTURE confers status and belonging to those who see the world as negatively as possible. Once people learned this, they were going to perceive the world as a *Hunger Games*-like hellscape.

This negativity saturates everything. As *The Atlantic*’s Derek Thompson noted recently, more than 5,500 podcasts now have the word *trauma* in their title. Political life is seen through a negative valence. A YouGov survey of 33,000 Americans found that both sides of the political debate believe they are losing. Liberals think the country is

moving right; conservatives are convinced that the country is moving left. Whatever your perspective, everything appears to be going downhill.

Even institutions as wholesome as motherhood have come to be seen as horrific. In December, *Vox* ran an essay titled “How Millennials Learned to Dread Motherhood.” A couple of weeks before that, *The New Yorker* published “The Morality of Having Kids in a Burning, Drowning World.” In previous eras, people were enculturated to see parenthood as a challenging but deeply rewarding and love-drenched experience. Now motherhood is regarded as a postapocalyptic shit show. Recently published books on motherhood include *Mom Rage*, *Screaming on the Inside*, and *All the Rage*.

In a culture where negativity is aligned with righteousness, anything good can be seen as a mark of ill-gotten privilege. And if by chance one does experience pleasure, don't be so insensitive as to admit it in public, because that will reveal you are not allying properly with the oppressed: “When I started asking women about their experiences as mothers,” Rachel Cohen wrote in that *Vox* essay, “I was startled by the number who sheepishly admitted, and only after being pressed, that they had pretty equitable arrangements with their partners, and even loved being moms, but were unlikely to say any of that publicly. Doing so could seem insensitive to those whose experiences were not as positive, or those in more frustrating relationships. Some also worried that betraying too much enthusiasm for child-rearing could ossify essentialist tropes or detract from larger feminist goals.” Publicly admitting that you love and enjoy motherhood has come to be seen as a betrayal of feminism.

THE CULTURE of collective negativity has had a deleterious effect on levels of trust: In 1964, 45 percent of Americans said that most people can be trusted, according to a survey by American National Election Studies. That survey no longer asks this question, but a University of Chicago survey asked the exact same question to Americans in 2022 and found that number is now 25 percent. Seventy-three percent of adults under 30 believe that, most of the time, people just look out for themselves, according to a 2019 Pew Research Center survey. Seventy-one percent say that most people “would try to take advantage of you if they got a chance.”

Human relationships have come to be viewed through a prism of power and exploitation. Institutions are assumed to be fundamentally illegitimate, rigged. A friend who teaches at Stanford recently told me that many of his students would not assume he had gone into teaching to serve his students, or to seek their good; rather, they see him as a cog in the corrupt system holding them down. Recently, I was struck by a sentence in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, in an article about how the economist Raj Chetty runs his research lab at Harvard. Chetty is the most important social scientist in America right now, because of his revelatory work on the relationship between income inequality and life opportunity. You might reasonably see getting to work in his lab as a tremendous honor, a great educational experience, and a professional launchpad. But that's not how several of his assistants saw it. "After landing the fellowship," *The Chronicle* reported, "some employees said they were also disturbed to find a culture of overwork that left them fried but feeling forced to impress in order to secure a letter of recommendation to a top Ph.D. program." If you see the system as legitimate, you will likely see the chance to work hard for a transformative scholar as an opportunity to achieve great things as part of a great team. If you see the system as illegitimate, that hard work is just a form of exploitation that will leave you "fried." If you see the system as legitimate, impressing mentors is a chance to earn the esteem of those whose esteem is worth having. If you see the system as illegitimate, the whole letters-of-recommendation business is a rigged game that allows the dominant to preserve their status.

Our most recent previous period of apocalyptic collectivism was the McCarthy era. During that time, the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr noticed that his fellow anti-communists were constantly demanding "that the foe is hated with sufficient vigor." It wasn't enough to disapprove of communism; one had to engage in collective moments of group hate. Meanwhile, on the left, intellectuals warned of a looming age of American fascism. This mode of escalating indignation led to what Niebuhr called "apoplectic rigidity," an inability to see the world as it is, but rather only those nightmarish elements that justify the hatred and rage that are the source of your self-worth.

Before long, apoplectic rigidity becomes the default mode of seeing things. This damages the ability to perceive reality accurately. One of the great mysteries of this political moment is why everyone feels so terrible about the economy when, in fact, it's in good shape. GDP is growing, inflation is plummeting, income inequality seems to be dropping, real wages are rising, unemployment is low, the stock market is reaching new peaks. And yet many people are convinced that the economy is rotten. These are not just Republicans unwilling to admit that things are going well under a Democratic president. The real divide is generational. In a recent *New York Times*/Sienna College [poll](#), 62 percent of people over 65 who voted for Joe Biden in 2020 report that the economy is “excellent” or “good”—but of Biden supporters ages 18 to 29, only 11 percent say the economy is excellent or good, while 89 percent say it is “poor” or “only fair.”

Is this because the economy is particularly bad for young people? That's not what the data reveal. As Twenge [has pointed out](#), the median Millennial household earns considerably more, adjusted for inflation, than median households of the Silent Generation, the Boomers, and Generation X earned at the comparable moment in their lives; they earn \$9,000 more a year than Gen X households, and \$10,000 more than Boomer households did at the same age. Household incomes for young adults are at historic highs, while homeownership rates for young adults are comparable to previous generations'. All of which suggests that difference in the generational experiences is not economic; it's psychological.

I CAN SEE WHY, in a lonely world, people would embrace the community that collective negativity offers. As the *New York Times* columnist David French [has noted](#), Trump rallies are filled with rage, but they are also characterized by a festive atmosphere, a sense of mutual belonging; immigrants might be poisoning America's blood, but we're having fun singing “Y.M.C.A.” together.

Being negative also helps you appear smart. In a classic 1983 [study](#) by the psychologist Teresa Amabile, authors of scathingly negative book reviews were perceived as more intelligent than the authors of positive reviews. Intellectually insecure people tend to be negative because they think it displays their brainpower.

Believing in vicious conspiracy theories can also boost your self-esteem: You are the superior mind who sees beneath the surface into the hidden realms where evil cabals really run the world. You have true knowledge of how the world works, which the masses are too naive to see. Conspiracy theories put you in the role of the truth-telling hero. Paranoia is the opiate of those who fear they may be insignificant.

The problem is that if you mess around with negative emotions, negative emotions will mess around with you, eventually taking over your life. Focusing on the negative inflates negativity. As John Tierney and Roy F. Baumeister note in their book *The Power of Bad*, if you interpret the world through the lens of collective trauma, you may become overwhelmed by self-perpetuating waves of fear, anger, and hate. You're likely to fall into a neurotic spiral, in which you become more likely to perceive events as negative, which makes you feel terrible, which makes you more alert to threats, which makes you perceive even more negative events, and on and on. Moreover, negativity is extremely contagious. When people around us are pessimistic, indignant, and rageful, we're soon likely to become that way too. This is how today's culture has produced mass neuroticism.

The neuroticism problem seems to be especially acute on the left. Over the past decade or so, depression rates have been rising for all young adults, but they have not been hitting all groups equally, according to a 2022 study by psychiatric epidemiologists. Liberal young women experienced the highest increase in depression levels. Liberal young women are also the most likely to be depressed, followed by liberal young men, conservative young women, and, the least depressed, conservative young men. Why should this be?

In the substantial literature on how happiness intersects with ideology, one of the most robust findings is that conservatives are happier than progressives. That's long been explained by the fact that conservatives are more likely to be married and to attend church, two activities that correlate with higher happiness levels. (Also, it could be that true conservatives, by definition, are more content with the status quo.)

But another explanation for this phenomenon that I find persuasive is that contemporary left-wing discourse tends to rob people of a sense of agency, what

psychologists call an “internal locus of control.” For example, in one 2022 survey 53 percent of those who identify as “very liberal” agree with the statement “Women in the United States have no hope for success because of sexism.” Meanwhile 59 percent of people who call themselves “very liberal” agree with the statement “Racial minorities in the United States have no hope for success because of racism.” If you have no hope of success because you are a victim of injustice, how can you possibly be motivated to do anything? How can you have a sense of agency? A discourse that was intended partly to empower people who suffer from structural disadvantages, by revealing the underlying forces that produced their circumstances, may end up doing the exact opposite: It enshrouds people in their own victimhood, and in the feeling that they have no control over their life.

“Just about everything researchers understand about resilience and mental well-being suggests that people who feel like they are the chief architects of their own life” are “vastly better off than people whose default position is victimization, hurt and a sense that life simply happens to them,” the journalist Jill Filipovic wrote recently on Substack. And yet victimization, pain, and powerlessness are now the approved postures of our time.

I am not saying that America doesn't have real problems—Trump, climate change, racial injustice, persistent income inequality, a rising tide of authoritarianism around the globe. In our age, as in every age, there are things to protest and things to be grateful for.

What I *am* saying is that the persistent gaps between how things are and how they are perceived are new, maybe even unprecedented. In case after case, the data show one thing; conventional wisdom perceives another. President Joe Biden leads an economy that is producing millions of jobs and raising real wages, but his poll numbers about his economic stewardship are terrible. He passes legislation that invests hundreds of billions of dollars in clean energy, but the people most agitated about climate change give him no credit. Biden's curse is that he is running not just against the Republicans but against the entire zeitgeist.

We have produced a culture that celebrates catastrophizing. This does not lend itself to effective strategies for achieving social change. The prevailing assumption seems to be that the more bitterly people denounce a situation, the more they will be motivated to change it. But history shows the exact opposite to be true. As the Harvard economist Benjamin Friedman demonstrated in *The Moral Consequences of Economic Growth*, social reform tends to happen in moments of growth and prosperity. It happens when people are feeling secure and are inspired to share their good fortune. It happens when leaders can convey a plausible vision of the common good.

A recent paper by four economists reinforces the idea that the mood of a culture can directly effect material progress. The researchers analyzed 173,031 works published from 1500 to 1900, and discovered that words relating to progress proliferated starting in the 1600s. The researchers infer that the “cultural evolution” this evinced over the coming centuries helped give rise to the Industrial Revolution and its concomitant economic benefits. John Burn-Murdoch, a data journalist for the *Financial Times*, recently extended this analysis to the present day using Google Ngram and found that “the frequency of terms related to progress, improvement, and the future has dropped by about 25 percent since the 1960s, while those related to threats, risks and worries have become several times more common.” That economic growth has slowed during this period is probably not coincidence, Burn-Murdoch notes. Doomsaying can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The thought of a second Trump term appalls and terrifies me. But to the more apocalyptic and Chicken Little-ish of my progressive friends, I'll say this: You're only helping him. Donald Trump thrives in an atmosphere of menace. Authoritarianism flourishes amid pessimism, fear, and rage. Trump feeds off zero-sum thinking, the notion that society is war—us-versus-them, dog-eat-dog. The more you contribute to the culture of depressive negativity, the more likely Trump's reelection becomes.

From the January/February 2024 issue: The left can't afford to go mad

The old late-20th-century culture of rampant individualism had to go. It liberated individuals but frayed the bonds that formerly united people. Somehow, our new communal culture needs to replace bonds of negative polarization and collective victimization with bonds of common loves and collective action.

One moment in history gives me hope. In the 1950s, as I've noted, the McCarthy era brought a wave of paranoia about communists under every bed. But that moment generated a cultural recoil that eventually led to, for instance, John F. Kennedy's inaugural address, one of the most lavishly optimistic addresses in American history: "Together, let us explore the stars, conquer the deserts, eradicate diseases, tap the ocean depths and encourage the arts and commerce." And it wasn't so long ago that Barack Obama thrilled millions with his gospel of hope and change. We shouldn't let our current season of gloom and menace become self-fulfilling, but rather should help make the country ripe for a communalism of belonging. History shows that it doesn't pay to be pessimistic about pessimism.

David Brooks is a contributing writer at *The Atlantic* and the author of the forthcoming book *How to Know a Person: The Art of Seeing Others Deeply and Being Deeply Seen*.

