The biggest problem we face: excessive optimism

It thwarts restraint, says Daniel Larison, and paints progress as inevitable

After the recent calamitous weeks of financial turmoil, five years of war in Iraq and a world haunted by the specter of catastrophic terrorism, it may seem bizarre to say that the greatest problem that we face as a people is the problem of excessive optimism.

Yet it has been optimism — which includes the belief that growth and progress are essentially limitless, that every problem has a solution and that the structures of our existence can be bent and changed according to our desires — that lies at the heart of our greatest difficulties. And it is optimism that prevents us from coping with the consequences of unrealistic expectations.

Optimism wars against restraint when it tells us that we can have it all, that values will always keep increasing, that we can have the goods we seek more often and at less cost. Optimism wars against nature when it tells us that there will always be a technological or mechanistic fix to any jam in which we happen to find ourselves.

As we are beginning to face a world where there are no longer problems to be solved so much as realities to be borne, a healthy move away from optimism is the first step toward finding some lasting happiness in a confused and fallen world.

The great frustrations that optimists have are that things very often do not work out for the best, that they do not necessarily improve and that progress is illusory. Whatever progress, moral or political, there may be in some areas, it is not automatic, nor is it an expression of ineluctable historical processes. If an advance occurs, it is the product of effort, intelligence and discipline, and that advance always comes with a trade-off.

Optimism is the mistaken view that progress is more or less inevitable. This makes life’s natural corrections and tragedies harder to understand and more difficult to accept. It also makes optimists less inclined to recognize failing strategies and the futility of entire policies, as recognizing one’s limits is redefined as defeat and surrender.

Any nation that possesses an optimistic mentality does not possess a feeling for the tragic in history, because they have recast their history as a series of triumphs over foreign enemies and enlightened and undeserving traditions at home. As such, they gradually lose respect for their own history, propelled onward to new and ever greater campaigns. At the same time, their expectations of continuing advancement and success put them increasingly at odds with their own future.

Our political system suffers from the malady of optimism as much as anything in our country. Incompetence and corruption do not inspire greater skepticism about politicians promising to change a broken system; instead, they seem to fuel our desire for these figures even more. Rather than intensifying our doubts about the efficacy of government action, government failures are treated as shocking aberrations.

One might have thought that the last two decades of American politics would promote a healthy wariness concerning would-be reformers and “change agents,” and yet we are more enthralled than ever.

This optimistic attitude does not lead to institutional reform or political transformation; it actually resigns people to the failed status quo by replacing the hard work of renovation with superficial nods to the latest political fads. At the same time, based in the conviction that every problem has a solution, politicians conclude that there are government solutions for whatever ails a nation, which means the role of government will have to increase and each new election will entail adding more and more indebtedness.

All of this eventually takes a toll. Raising expectations that cannot be met only to dash them brutally inflicts suffering. But more than that, the continuous raising of expectations denies that we should settle for what our parents had, that there ought to be limits to what we can have. This portends either exhaustion of our resources or an unending escalation that eventually consumes those pursuing the receding horizon.

Pursuing happiness is part of who we are. But what the pessimist says — and I think I can speak for the pessimists here — is that happiness must have its limits if it is to be possessed. It will be fleeting; as all things are in this world, and will come at some price — be it a price in discipline, loss, suffering, regret of even the abandonment of some principle or high ideal. It is, above all, often overrated.

In saying this, the pessimist is not trying to be gloomy or bitter, but simply honest in assessing the nature of things. Pessimism is a reasonable position not because bad things keep happening — that wouldn’t be much of a basis for a philosophical view — but because man is a finite, flawed, created being who cannot overcome the structures inherent in his existence. If one learns to live within these structures and accepts them as basically unchangeable, then he will know a measure of peace and happiness as he pursues his good desires within reason.

In pessimism there is hope, wisdom and, yes, even a measure of happiness.

Daniel Larison is a columnist and contributing editor at The American Conservative. He blogs at Eunomia (www.amconmag.com/larison). A longer version of this essay originally appeared at Culture11.com.