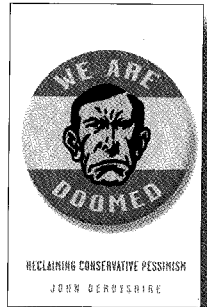


A Huge and Healthy Pessimism

by Jack Trotter



We Are Doomed: Reclaiming Conservative Pessimism

by John Derbyshire
New York: Crown Forum
272 pp., \$26.00

IN HIS SPLENDIDLY SARDONIC *Devil's Dictionary*, that old gringo Ambrose Bierce defines pessimism as "a philosophy forced upon the convictions of the observer by the disheartening prevalence of the optimist with his scarecrow hope and his unsightly smile." Bierce would have smiled—or, rather, frowned—kindly upon John Derbyshire's new book, an often droll demolition of the facile, smiley-faced optimism that passes for political philosophy these days. Early on he offers a diagnosis that will warm the cockles of the heart of many a *Chronicles* reader: Conservatism in America has been hijacked by "infantile . . . temptations to optimism, to wishful thinking, to happy talk, to cheerily preposterous theories about human beings and the human world." His prognosis is more succinct: "We are doomed." Just how seriously does Derbyshire expect his readers to take his counsels of despair? Very seriously, indeed, though with a caveat: "Despair should be large and general, not petty and particular." I am happy to report that Derbyshire's despair is as "large and general" as any self-respecting pessimist might wish.

I certainly can't begin to do justice to the rich profusion of optimistic imbecility on display in Derbyshire's catalog of hap-

py horrors, so I will peruse a few key chapters. In "Diversity: Nothing to Celebrate," he responds to Rodney King's blubbing query after the 1992 Los Angeles riots: "People, I just want to say, you know, can we all get along?" Derbyshire's answer is an emphatic "no, we can't." The gurus of the "Diversity cult" would have us believe not only that people of diverse races, customs, and religions can get along, but that diversity is also beneficial: "[People] will be better and happier than if they had been left to stagnate in dull homogeneity." A diverse corporate America, for example, will be more creative and better positioned to succeed in the multicultural marketplace. Schools with diverse faculties and students will be better equipped to negotiate the complex (but never dull!) realities of a multicultural world and will be morally improved by the experience. Our military, too, should be a New Model Army of Diversity, for what could be more uplifting than the spectacle of American blacks and whites, Hispanics and Asians, Muslims and Christians, hetero- and homosexuals, *et al.*, joining arms to wreak havoc in pesky places like Serbia and Afghanistan—or any other bastion of resistance to Global Democracy?

Of course, it is no longer a question of "will be" or "can be." The triumph of the diversity cult is virtually a *fait accompli*. Did Americans rush to embrace diversity with open arms? Certainly not. Derbyshire points out that diversity mon-itors and managers have been busy every

step of the way: persuading, propagandizing, hectoring, threatening—but always smiling! Indeed, diversity has become a growth industry in America. Diversity officers in major universities and corporations are forces to be reckoned with. The CDO (chief diversity officer) at Washington State University, for instance, commands an annual budget of three million dollars and employs a staff of 55. One would think that after several decades of unrelenting labor and such a tremendous allocation of resources, the diversity impresarios might have something impressive to show for their efforts. On the contrary, it turns out that increased diversity is a key factor in the decline of "social capital" (the total aggregate of a society's social networks and associations), a phenomenon studied by political scientist Robert Putnam. The results of Putnam's research, released to the public in 2007, were discouraging (for Putnam, anyway). In a study involving 30,000 Americans in 41 locations, virtually all the indicators suggest that "out-group trust—how much you trust people who are different from yourself—is lower in places with lots of diversity." Even worse, if you live in a locale characterized by high diversity, your "in-group" trust level is likely to decrease by as much as 50 percent. In short, far from creating social harmony, diversity generates more alienation. A number of conservative writers have drawn on Putnam's work, but few have been honest enough to suggest, as Derbyshire does, that "eth-

nic homogeneity may be necessary for a stable, liberal democracy.”

All of this is bad news for those who have optimistically embraced a dream of multicultural plenitude. But is it really something to get terribly worked up about? After all—as Derbyshire admits—it’s not as though Americans are at each other’s throats with pitchforks. No, but his own evidence strongly suggests that Americans can’t expect to remain immune from the rising tide of ethnic and religious conflict that afflicts almost every other part of the globe, a specter that raises troubling questions about U.S. immigration policy.

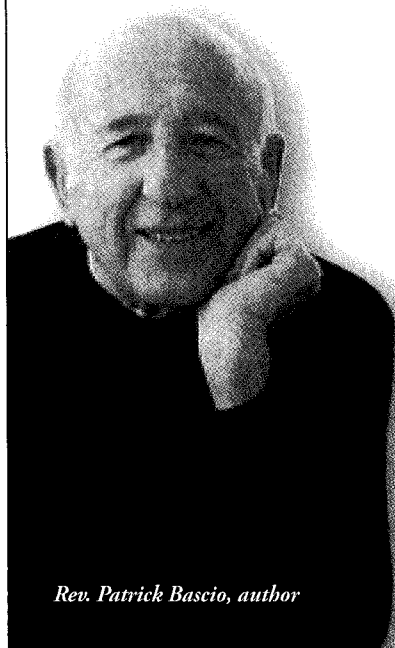
In a chapter entitled “Immigration: Inviting the World,” Derbyshire argues that few areas of political debate in America are as subject to delusional, sentimental thinking as immigration. On this issue, as with diversity, there is little difference between the two major parties: Self-advertised “conservatives” are just as likely as their liberal counterparts to repeat the tired canard that America is a nation of immigrants, that we have always managed to assimilate immigrant waves in the past, and that we will do so again. So the mantra goes. “Kumbaya conservatives breezily assure us that all is well; that the current great wave of immigrants are ‘good-hearted people’ who will assimilate just as the 1890-1920 Great Wave did.” Those who traffic in such pabulum never reflect that conditions before World War I were drastically different. Then, the American manufacturing and agricultural sectors were still creating plenty of new jobs; today, those jobs are rapidly disappearing (or being outsourced). Another difference is that the assimilationist ethic that was taken for granted by the “naïve Americanism” of our forefathers has been replaced by a multicultural ethic that promotes what Derbyshire (who is fond of neologisms) calls “absimilation”—the refusal to assimilate. A third difference, little noted, is that as many as one third of the Great Wave immigrants did not stay.

When they failed, there was no Nanny State to share their pain.

Of course, the 20th century brought many changes, among them the feminization of America—a change that is now accelerating rapidly. In a chapter entitled “Sex: Surplus to Requirements,” Derbyshire argues, on the one hand, that female suffrage has been a major cause of the country’s slide toward socialism, and, on the other, that the damage is probably irreversible because, in a “postindustrial society, men just don’t do very well.” Why that should be is not something Derbyshire explores systematically, but the argument, however anecdotal, is one that I find persuasive. In short, the postindustrial economy simply doesn’t require traditionally masculine virtues or capacities such as “physical courage, danger-seeking, the honor principle, belligerence, chivalry, endurance [and] small-group loyalty.”

Women’s superior communication and social (i.e., “networking”) skills are perfectly suited to the hive-like postindustrial economy and its emerging emphasis on “soft” management styles. Derbyshire, who spent a number of years in the corporate world, opines that men “seem rather out of place in the ‘tubes and cubes’ of the modern office,” where traditional masculine traits are not only increasingly useless but even counterproductive. In their place we find the “mildness of manners, the endless tiny courtesies, the yielding and compromising, the cheery assertions of delivery-room stoicism . . . that are necessary to get this kind of work done.” It should come as no surprise, then, that from 1995 to 2005 women entered American graduate schools at more than twice the rate of men. Moreover, the young men who are most successful in the new economy are those who have been most willing

Unfettered immigration policy is harmful, dangerous, and wrong, says Fr. Patrick Bascio in his new book, *On the Immorality of Illegal Immigration: A Priest Poses An Alternative Christian View*



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On the Immorality of Illegal Immigration: A Priest Poses an Alternative Christian View by Fr. Patrick Bascio (Author House 2009) 215 pages.

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to shed their masculinity and adapt to the feminine style.

What should conservatives make of all this? The properly pessimistic prognosis is grim: Traditional conservatism (as opposed to the happy-face, compassionate variety) simply is not very attractive to the gentler sex, nor to the young metrosexual drones who service them. As society becomes increasingly feminized, genuine conservatism will retreat to the margins.

While Derbyshire's pessimism is unrelenting, the humor with which he invests his dire auguries is a redeeming feature. This is perhaps most evident in his romp through contemporary art, literature, music, and popular entertainment: "Culture: Pooped Out." As the punning chapter title suggests, Derbyshire's take on the cultural sphere is rather scatolog-

ical. Consider the "masterpiece" of celebrated Italian artist Piero Manzoni, a "work" entitled *Merda d'artista*, which consists "of 90 one-ounce portions of Manzoni's own solid waste, each portion neatly canned and each can numbered." Those neat packages are still around, circulating through the modern-art marketplace at dizzying prices. The Tate Gallery in London recently acquired a single can for \$61,000, justifying the purchase on the grounds that Manzoni was "an important international artist" who was making a profound statement about the "production of art." Not to be outdone, an American collector recently paid \$80,000 for another can. Derbyshire suggests that what is most profound about Manzoni's statement is the tiny faults the "artist" deliberately left in the sealing of the cans, some of which have apparently been known to explode. (In an aside, Derbyshire asks, "How would you like to be in the Restoration Department when one of those suckers comes in?")

Derbyshire's point is not to deplore such chicanery with an anguished wringing of hands (as cultural critics on the right so often have), but to suggest that our culture is simply exhausted, "pooped out." Thus, at the level of popular entertainment, we witness an increasing preoccupation with filth and the pornographic. Among the most popular genres on American television is what Derbyshire calls "dead-whore shows," in which "plainclothes police types and pathologists in lab coats converse in a sort of portentous murmur over the corpses of mutilated street ladies." In lieu of character development one gets "lingering close-ups of entry wounds, exit wounds, contusions . . . dismemberments, decapitations, eviscerations, exsanguinations, etc."

Is all this really just a symptom of an exhausted culture? I would argue, to the contrary, that "high art" and popular culture are by now virtually indistinguishable in their mutual reveling in spiritual

debasement. Those "dead-whore" shows, for instance, are direct descendants of the work of surrealists Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray, both of whom were fascinated by the "transgressive" art of serial killers, especially when said "art" involved the dismembered bodies of women. Surely, there is something more sinister than "exhaustion" at work here. But Derbyshire, as a self-described "functional atheist," acknowledges no spiritual reality, and would thus reject the notion that the human body is in any sense sacred. While he is willing to make common cause with those whose pessimism (in secular matters) is derived from what he calls "Religionism," he doesn't really trust such a pessimism, presumably because it does not breathe exclusively the "sweet cool draft of indifferent Truth" produced by physical science. Religionists can't be trusted not to ally themselves with the Culturalists (those who believe that "human nature has very little innate structure and is extremely plastic"). An authentic pessimism is, paradoxically, not really a part of human nature; it is something we must "struggle towards."

Perhaps Derbyshire's admirable pessimism should be leavened with a measure of skepticism, especially toward the truth claims of modern science. He avers that religious belief serves merely a consolatory function but admits to being baffled by the phenomenon of consciousness. He allies himself with the "Mysterians," who, as it turns out, are not some New Age cult but a rather select bunch of atheists like Derbyshire who are willing to concede that the existence of human consciousness is a problem which eludes the grasp of scientific understanding. Some of them opine that consciousness will never be understood; some are more confident that, in time, it will. Is this a little like waiting for the Second Coming?

Jack Trotter writes from Charleston, South Carolina.

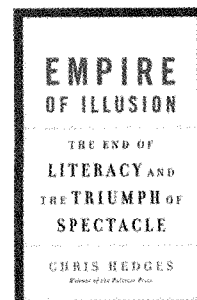


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Don't Worry, Be Happy

by Clark Stooksbury

Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle

by Chris Hedges

New York: Nation Books

232 pp., \$24.95

CHRIS HEDGES, a former *New York Times* war correspondent, is not happy with the current state of American civilization, a view he makes crystal clear in *Empire of Illusion*. Hedges is an independent man of the left and a cultural conservative. *Chronicles* readers may recall the controversy over his commencement address in 2003 at Rockford College, covered by Scott P. Richert in *The Rockford Files* (August 2003). In that speech, Hedges delivered a harsh, unpopular, and largely accurate assessment of the coming occupation in Iraq. *Empire of Illusion* renders a similarly harsh assessment of the state of American culture in 2009.

Empire is a scattershot look at a variety of topics ranging from the porn industry to elite education. Hedges believes that Americans have forsaken reality for a world of lies and empty entertainment. Some of the more troubling results are plain—a series of disastrous foreign wars and a collapsing economy. The major problems we currently face were avoidable, had people paid attention to calls for military restraint and to questions regarding the ability of the housing market to rise indefinitely. In Hedges' view, Americans are as distracted by fantasy as those who view the shadows on the wall

of Plato's cave:

those who manipulate the shadows that dominate our lives are the agents, publicists, marketing departments, promoters, script writers, television and movie producers, advertisers, video technicians, photographers, . . . pollsters, public announcers, and television news personalities who create the vast stage for illusion.

"[N]othing," Hedges claims, "is off-limits, including death. As long as it can be packaged and turned into drama, it works."

As to higher education, "elite universities disdain honest intellectual inquiry, which is by its nature distrustful of authority." Hedges is particularly critical of the results of specialization, and of the dense jargon that characterizes it, recalling his inability to decipher the meaning of a fellow graduate of the Harvard Divinity School, though he shared her academic training. Of such as she, he insists,

[b]y any standard comprehensible within the tradition of Western Civilization . . . these people are illiterate. They cannot recognize the vital relationship between power and morality. They have forgotten, or never knew, that moral traditions are the

product of civilization.

Another jargon-laden field ridiculed by Hedges is "Positive Psychology." As he describes it, Positive Psychology is a scheme to manufacture happiness out of thin air and institutionalize conformity. Happiness is a slippery concept and difficult to measure, but government agencies, schools, and corporations have adopted the techniques of various Positive Psychology gurus. Hedges, comparing adherents to Positive Psychology with the addled denizens of Huxley's *Brave New World*, concludes that

the awful feeling that being positive may not, in fact, work if one is laid off or becomes sick must be suppressed. Here, in the land of happy thoughts, there are no gross injustices, no abuses of authority, no economic and political systems to challenge, and no reason to complain. Here, we are all happy.

In respect of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, major media outlets often served as stenographers to sources within the Bush administration. Judith Miller, who worked at the *New York Times* (Hedges' former paper), admitted, according to Hedges, that her work was "only as good as [her] sources." Hedges counters that reporters should "always begin with the assumption that those