

Optimism as antidote to despair

by Aidan Cornelius-Bell

Published: 2024-12-13

Dear friends,

I have been thinking about optimism and despair. Actually, I've been reading on optimism over despair [1] and thinking about an analytical pattern that might help us mobilise this kind of thought in the way we discuss contemporaneous issues on **mind reader**. So, yes, this post is a meta post about being meta, what else have you come to expect from me? I'm going to talk in abstract about both the reason for optimism, and for despair, and how we might mobilise these against the way they are mobilised by the capitalist class. Because what's better than human emotion, passion, feeling and process against something so fundamentally inhuman, nonhuman, non-human as capitalism. Let's get into it...

Chomsky uses a pattern of explanatory critique that comprises his own unique theoretical positioning. I suspect, to label him as a "Marxist theorist" is to do him disservice given the expansive canon of his texts over the decades. But, and gee can you tell I'm a fan, there is a tangible pattern to a great deal of his writing that offers not just critique, explication, and contextualisation of thinking, theorising, politics and more, but also a movement. This movement, I think, is what is often missing from other contemporary Marxist theory. In my own work, I reflect, that following Gramscian notions of praxis — rather than, say, theorisation for theorisations sake — I have been able to portray a sense of *change* or at least the desire for change. This, I have been told, demonstrates immeasurable optimism in the face of challenges. Cool. I'm in this meta and ... I guess I like it?

Chomsky, particularly in his recent books combining letters and correspondence on contemporary politics, shows a pattern of writing and thinking. It looks something like this:

1. Offer a clear-eyed analysis of serious problems. This includes contemporary and sometimes even reactionary (in the Marxist sense) political moments, anything from the climate crisis to nuclear threats and recently robust explanation of democratic decay.
2. Contextualise through examination of historical parallels where collective action achieved meaningful change despite seemingly insurmountable odds. This, in particular, is useful for understanding modes "out of" our current crises (or reactions, and so on).
3. Offer identification of current opportunities and levers for change. Weaving the topic of concern, into a historical mesh that explains both how a given phenomena may be understood through an anti-capitalist lens, while offering possibility and momentum. But more specifically, directing people to protestation that holds precedent.
4. Finally, subtle emphasis on how despair serves power by making resistance seem futile. This is where, I think, we all need a reminder. When we allow in-fighting, degradation of comradeship, and separation from our causes (qua collapse into arbitrary battles instead of fighting the ruling class) we are giving into the despair which sees individualism rise, narcissistic solutions to big problems, and failures of solidarity from all parties involved.

This pattern, expanded loosely here, intriguingly follows form with some of the **mind reader** posts shared, but not all. And I think, when we stray from this trajectory, we do each other a disservice. My last post, admittedly not my best, showed a way to respond to reactionary politics — engagement with discourse, personalisation of opinion, sharing of commentary, and so on. But it didn't follow the trajectory of this pattern. Something I'm looking to

do a better job of moving forward —without binding myself to a formula that puts everyone to sleep. If we re-frame the pattern explored above as a movement:

Despair -> (Analysis -> Ideation ->) Optimism

We can see collectivised analysis —work in the ballpark of this project (said humbly) — as advancing hope. I don’ t know about you, but I find engaging with news, mainstream journalism, incredibly difficult. Particularly on days where I feel down about things. And partly this is my own filter, bringing such disdain for the cancer that is our onto-economic system, tarnishing news celebrating billionaires’ newfound oligopoly. And partly it’ s the nature of hegemonic media offering no relief from the ontic primacy of capitalism. It’ s one of those “once you see it” moments —once you know how to identify how anti-human capitalism is, you see the values, attitudes and approach everywhere. It’ s gross. Not to mention racist, sexist, classist, ableist, and so much more —and liberal notions of “inclusion” do not quell the rage for the bullshit that is this way of life... But the answer isn’ t (only) rage, just as it cannot be despair. Rather it’ s salient, theoretical analysis, closed by calls for action that are actualised, contextualised, or meaningful. Instead, I want to offer hope or at least optimistic naivete.

Some days, of course, you just feel *done*. And that’ s okay too, we all need a bitch, cry, or meditation every now and then, but I hope we can collectively, readers, writers, thinkers, activists, change makers and those unable to “unsee” capitalism’ s exploitation find the collective space to move towards an optimistic future. Because otherwise we’ re advancing values that both support capitalism’ s exploitation, and we’ re feeding our own death and destruction.

That’ s not optimism, though. Let me take my own medicine so that we may be hopeful about the future.

We are in a time where forces of evil —literal fascists —vie for power in a system designed for the destruction of 99% of humans, and 100% of the environment for the benefit of less than 1%. The optimism, though, is in the numbers. Time and again, workers of all varieties have come together to transform this system for the better. To resist the attacks, undermining, and lateral violence of a system that knows no bounds. Even when we have shit day after shit day, the environment suffers catastrophic losses, human rights take a backslide, or our own personal circumstances seem helpless we still collectively hold a spirit of recovery, change, revitalisation, and energy. We have a fundamentally human value of hope. A human value of optimism.

We have the power to change our trajectory. And this is demonstrable in analyses by countless thinkers. Shown in the wins of activists, unionists, and independent radicals the world over. And time and again we (humans) have shown that we can come together. And we can change the world. We do this in myriad ways. Not just activism. Not just theory. Not just governance. Not just solidarity. Not one mode —because there is no such thing as one size fits all. We all change the world in small ways, and through our *collective* thought, care, and values we can reassert something fundamentally different that moves us to optimistic spaces.

Here’ s *feeling*. We must continue to assert that change is possible. We collectivise optimism. We need to find ways to unite. Because it is every. single. one. of. us. in the 99% against the Musks, Trumps, Zuccs, Cooks, and so on. Let’ s do better, be better, and rise above attacking each other. “The workers united will never be defeated” . Not as an excuse to ignore the intersectional needs of our friends, neighbours, and comrades —actually, quite the opposite. Learn about intersectional causes. Find allyship. Move forward in respectful and reciprocal ways. And above all, stay hopeful, optimistic, and moving towards a brighter future, because at the moment that’ s really all we’ ve got —anything is better than this deeply troubling and very real global return to fascism.

With love, optimism, and respect,

Aidan

-
1. Chomsky, N., & Polychroniou, C. (2017). Optimism over despair: On capitalism, empire and social change. Penguin Books.