

# The new 'Story Wars': In this campaign, the Pessimists Party is battling the Optimists over the American self-concept

Kavitha Surana / 2 hours ago

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Best Defense office of next week's news

Optimism and pessimism about the future is the new political divide. It is the defining political conflict of the 21st century.

Optimists and pessimists about the future cut across all lines. You can find them among cultural liberals and conservatives, economic liberals and conservatives, ethical liberals and conservatives, and advocates of government big and small.

This fundamental split causes today's major reordering of our 21st-century politics. It scrambles any Industrial Age thinking about what constitutes "left" and "right" — who has and who wants.

This sundering describes Brexit, and Donald Trump versus Hillary Clinton, and the rise and collapse of the Arab spring — including Benghazi.

If the 2016 U.S. election is in any way profound, it is because everyone feels the ground moving beneath the feet of their children and jobs and communities. We are looking for narratives describing how we should grapple with dramatic upheaval in our futures. When the ground moves beneath her feet, any sane primate looks for something apparently solid to hang on to. That's why anybody will attract attention who offers apparently simple answers, powerfully expounded.

Fear and anxiety? Or hope and confidence? Which should it be?

Unnervingly, in this divide, each side thinks the other is at best out of touch with reality, if not insane. Or self-evident liars. Which excludes the ability to trust them. That's why this gulf between "us" and "them" is so difficult to bridge through reason alone. This is why violence

between these two world views is to be feared. History shows battles of fundamental narratives can lead to hundred-year wars. More about this in a moment.

Those who have been living in the future the longest are those who most vividly demonstrate this split. More than two decades ago, the ground moving beneath our feet first became obvious to the engineers, technologists, scientists, and dreamers creating the enormous change that is transforming our world. They could see the GRIN technologies — the genetic, robotic, information, and nano revolutions — transforming war, disease, jobs, agriculture, and the foods we put in our bodies, along with globalization, finance, manufacturing, and retail. The new technologies were taking aim at our minds, memories, metabolisms, personalities, and progeny. How could that not spill over into our culture, values, and society?

Today, we no longer find it odd to watch the Olympics and wonder if the winners are biologically engineered. Or at least hope they are not. Or revile as untrustworthy those who are and try to get them thrown out of the competition as not traditionally human.

But that's old news to those who have been building this unsettling world and grappling with its implications. Sure enough, what you see among them is the damndest strange-bedfellows list. "Liberal" and "conservative" are awkward labels in this realm.

Among the pessimists about the future, one will find prominent "bioconservatives" such as Leon Kass, former chair of the U.S. President's Council on Bioethics. But among those who agree with him about some things are Jeremy Rifkin and his Foundation for Economic Trends, the Green Party, many who loathe globalism (especially the unregulated marketplace, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank), folks who don't believe we are descended from monkeys, much of the Christian pro-life movement, feminists from the Boston Women's Health Book Collective (including the editor of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, who has been described as more pro-choice than the pope is Catholic), and Prince Charles.

Environmentalists usually see organized science as their ally in the fight against climate change or for habitat conservation. Yet Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace have lined up against human cloning. William Kristol, editor of the conservative *Weekly Standard*, signed the same petition against human cloning, as did Tom Hayden and Todd Gitlin, stalwarts of the sixties left.

Optimists about the future offer a similarly fascinating spread. They include the staunchly libertarian individualists and market-driven entrepreneurs one finds so thick on the ground in Silicon Valley. But among these, you also get endorsement of open societies such as the Western social democracies and rejection of authoritarian or totalitarian systems, whether they be of the left or the right. These entrepreneurs love federal research spending. In fact,

they deeply rely on it.

On the websites of optimists about the future, it's easy to find denunciations of racism, sexism, speciesism, belligerent nationalism, and religious intolerance. Greens are imaginatively represented as looking forward to ecological fixes through technology. You can find feminists who welcome a future that does not require men for anything, including procreation. Increasingly mainstream are arguments for a universal guaranteed human income. After all, it's the least all those robots who will produce our cornucopia can do for us, since we made them possible.

Yes, among the pessimists about the future you will find social "conservatives" who have found great support in right-wing governments. But remarkably, when it comes to gene tinkering, the solution they often reach for is massive government regulation to thwart individual choice. Hardly a hallmark of conservative thought in the late 20th century. It may be more useful to refer to them as founders of the Pessimist Party.

Many optimists about the future who call themselves "transhumanists" can readily be described as "liberal." Not only is that their political history, but they embrace radical social change. Yet their agenda is often libertarian — allowing each individual to decide for herself and her family which available futures they should embrace, how and when. So perhaps a more constructive label for them would be early stalwarts of the Optimist Party.

With this scramble of Industrial Age categories, why are we surprised when a billionaire becomes the hero of displaced workers facing so much despair that you see data spikes in middle-class whites turning to suicide or drugs? This is not about being liberal or conservative, it's about spinning a narrative of deep pessimism — and demanding the most draconian means to shut it all down. This is why traditional conservatives in the Republic Party were blindsided by Trump. They're still preaching Industrial Age nostrums. He's not. He's moved on to face our, ahem, brave new world.

Or not.

Clinton is nothing if not an optimist. "It is often when night looks darkest, it is often before the fever breaks," she has [said](#), "that one senses the gathering momentum for change, when one feels that resurrection of hope in the midst of despair and apathy."

She is not, however, a great storyteller, as her trust issues demonstrate. This is a problem for her. Humans are pattern-seeking, storytelling animals. That's how we make sense of chaos. We cannot endure emptiness and desolation. We will fill the vacuum by creating a new focus of meaning. Think of the constellations in the night sky. Rather than deal with the possibility

of that being a random distribution, humans eagerly connect dots and come up with the most elaborate — even poetic — tales, adorning them with bears and princesses, heroes, and myths.

This is why the best storytellers have been getting the best piece of meat around the campfire for a very long time.

This is why the battle between the pessimists about the future and the optimists is our new normal and will be for a long time. Those who crave power tomorrow are deeply studying 2016's candidates and campaigns today, and thinking about what they will craft differently when it is their turn to try.

This battle is not going away. The stories they will tell as they stake out their respective turfs will compete: The stories will be about what is dying and about what is being born — whether we are witnessing the end of something or the beginning of something.

Those who succeed in telling the most convincing stories will win the election. The battle between those narratives is our new permanent condition.

More worrisome is whether the winners will win the hearts and minds — or at least acquiescence — of those on the other side. Let us hope this beliefs divide is not so deep and irreconcilable and ultimately difficult to resolve by reason alone that it turns into a civil-religion culture war.

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