

In Defence of Optimism

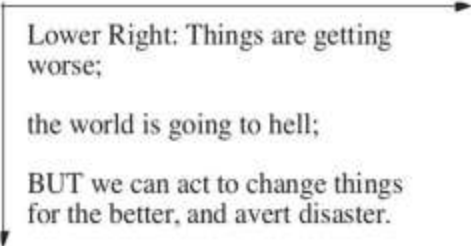
Roy Blake
March 2018



Suggested by Peter Hayward, based on *The Image of the Future* by the Dutch sociologist Frederik Lodewijk Polak (1961). He was Jewish and a Holocaust survivor.

My Guess

- Most Unitarians are in the bottom right quadrant (pessimistic but not despairing)



Lower Right: Things are getting worse;

the world is going to hell;

BUT we can act to change things for the better, and avert disaster.

Benefits of Optimism

- Better mood
- Better health
- Longer life
- More achievements
- Benefits are similar to those of religion.
- But -- is optimism justified?

Personal Observations

- Optimism seems to decline with age.
 - Remembrances of the “Good old days.”
- Many don’t distinguish between optimism for their personal life and optimism for humanity in general.
- People get set in their ways and impatient with the young.
 - They will replace us and we can’t do anything about it.

People remember the energy of youth and the sense of an unlimited future and compare it with the limitations of age.

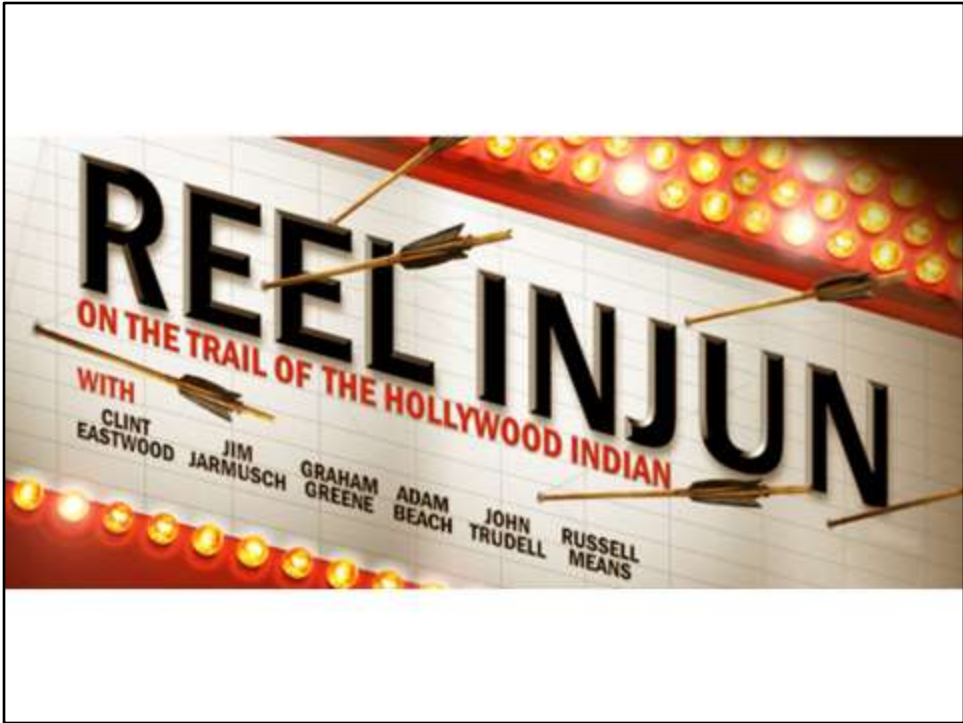
“The Good Old Days”

Fear of death or debility colours opinions.

The "Good Old Days"



Restrictive covenants for land were finally banned in Canada in 1950



Nostalgic | Annoying



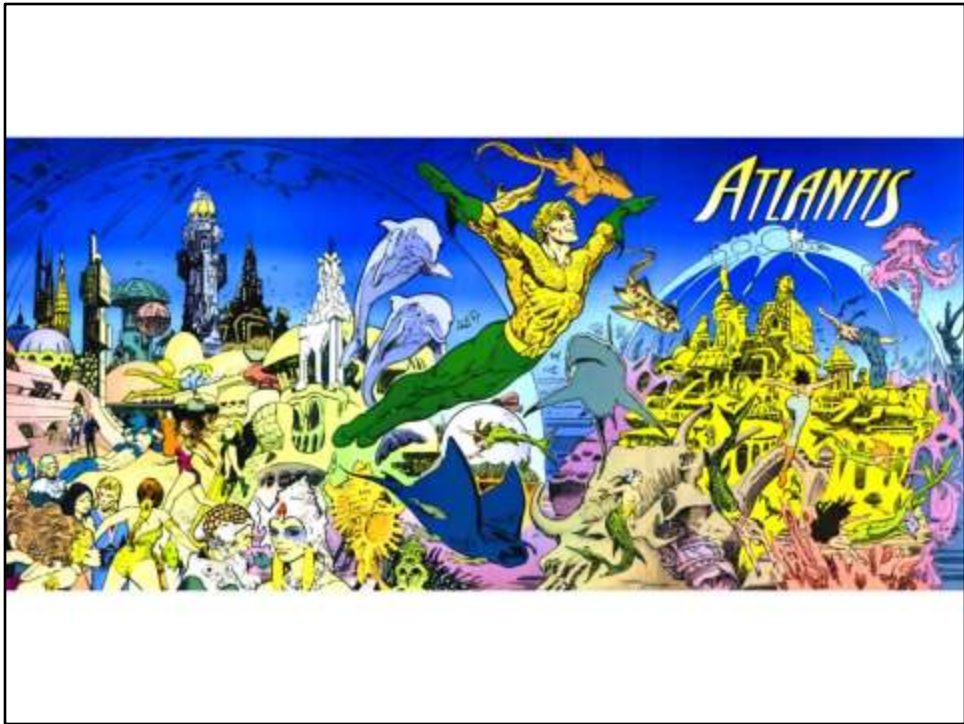
Two Sides to Pessimism

- Nostalgia for a mythical golden age
- Fear of a Dystopian Future

The Golden Age



Hieronymus Bosch: Garden of Eden



In XANADU did Kubla Khan, a stately pleasure dome decree.

—Chaucer



Themyscira



Home of the Amazons (and Wonder Woman)

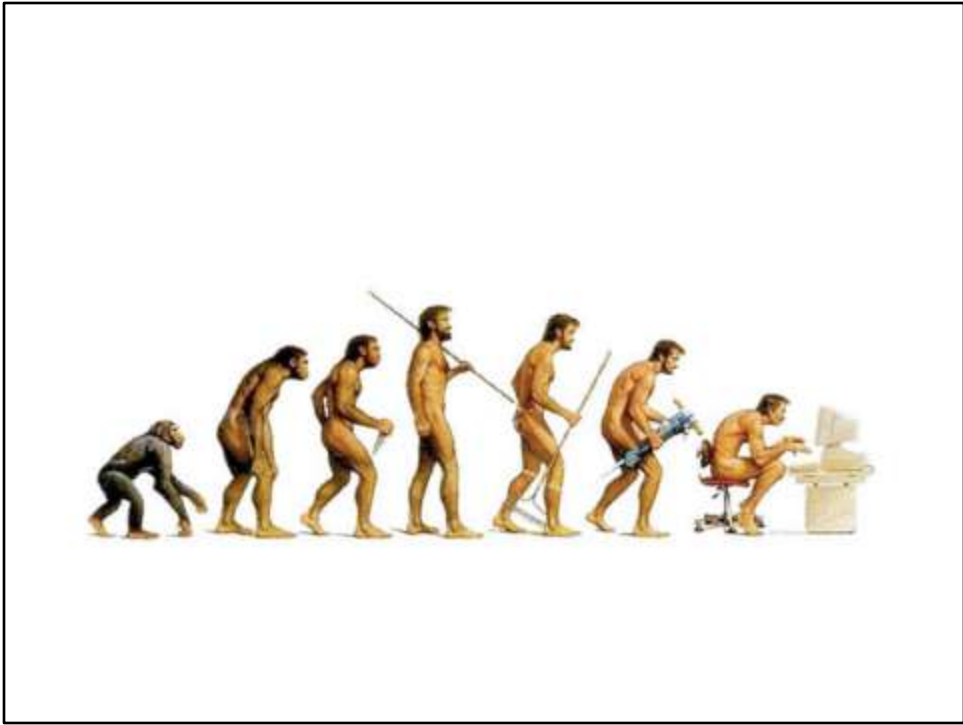
Pandora



Avatar



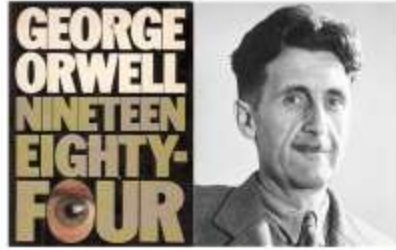
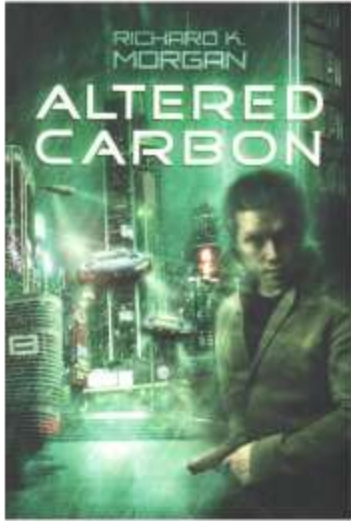
Remember that more people were servants than had servants. All images are of fictional places – the real golden age never existed



Possible Futures: Dystopian



Consumerism, wealth concentration, climate change, general exhaustion, wars, epidemics



Utopian



Robert McCall 1983 Mural, The Prologue and the Promise (Disney Epcot Center)

Brook Farm (1841-1847)



Founded by George Ripley, a Unitarian, on principles of strict equality. Near Boston Thoreau: "As for these communities, I think I had rather keep a bachelor's room in Hell than go to board in Heaven."

Went bankrupt – everyone wanting to be an intellectual, lack of labourers.

Rochdale College (1968-1975)





Sylvia Ziemann, "Accidental Utopia," 2017: [Art Gallery of Regina](#), Saskatchewan A woman with wild hair plays cards with a party of bipedal animals, while elsewhere a group gathers around a fire. Other animals are occupied with solitary activities. "Their society is non-hierarchical, and not burdened by racism and sexism, by capitalism or greed," says the show's literature. "After an unnamed disaster, citizens realize that survival depends upon experimentation, play and cooperation." Despite these positive assertions, a corpse hangs in a tree. Bombs and a house float in the pond.

An Optimistic Future

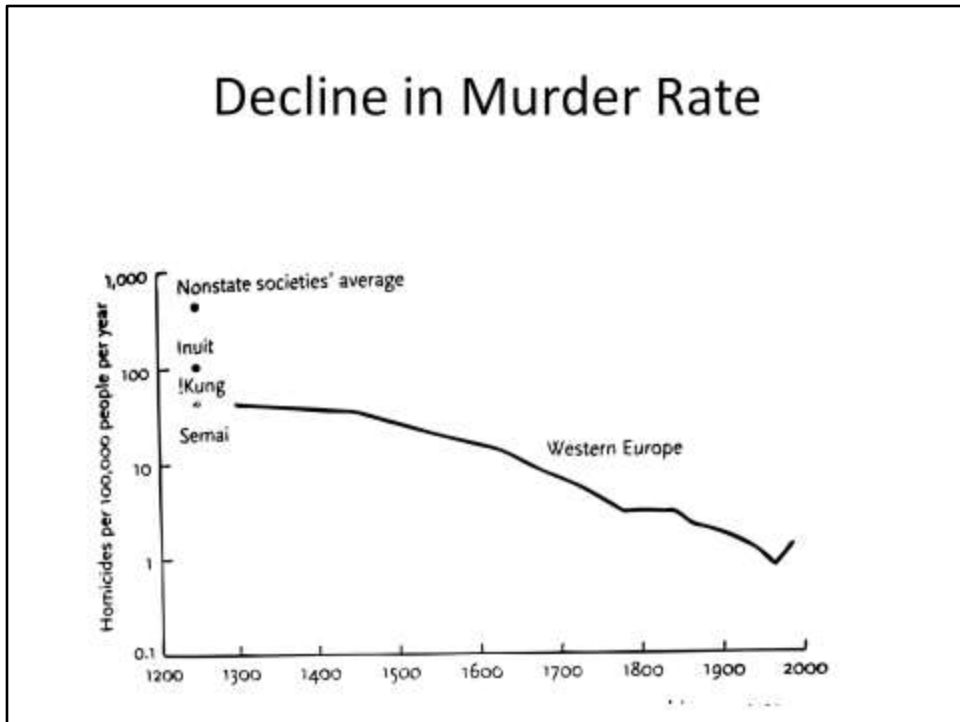
- Sustainable low-carbon technology
- Sustainable agriculture
- Stable population (eventually)
- More income equality (but not perfect equality)
- Less racism and sexism
- Less conflict (but not zero conflict)
- Better health, longer life (but not forever)
- Better education
- More leisure time

- (Not very cinematic!)

Is Optimism Justified?

- Has life for most improved over the long term?
 - The answer is certainly yes, though more in the first than the third world.
 - Longer lives
 - Better health
 - Less violence
 - Less superstition, more real knowledge
 - More opportunity to learn and to travel
 - Greater equality

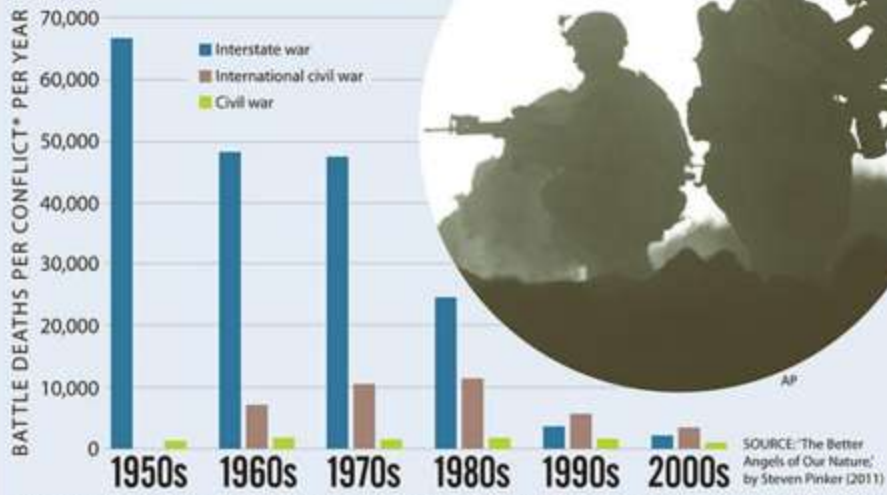
Decline in Murder Rate



Source: The Better Angels of our Nature by Steven Pinker (2011)

Deadliness of wars

We may be living in the most peaceful time in the history of mankind, argues scientist Steven Pinker, in part because the average war kills fewer people.

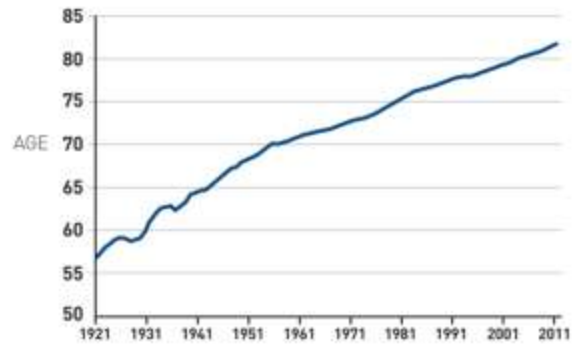


Canadian War Deaths

- World War I: 68,000
 - 3598 in one day, battle of Vimy Ridge
- World War II: 47,000
 - 916 in one day in Dieppe Raid
- Korea: 516
- Afghanistan: 158

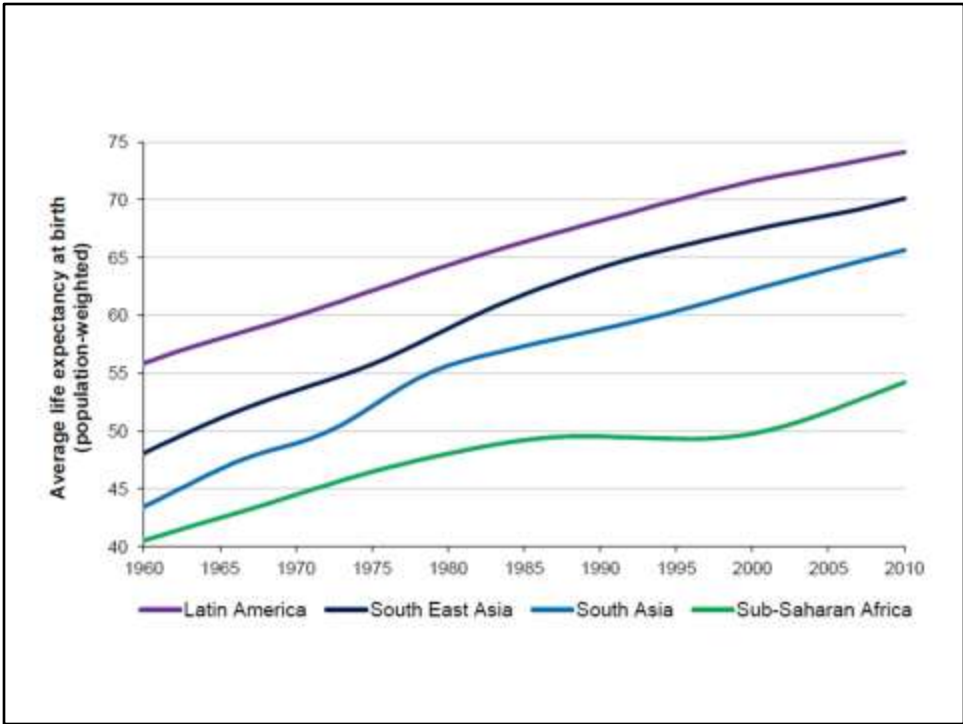
Life Expectancy

Change in life expectancy at birth
CANADA SINCE 1921



CBC NEWS

Source: Statistics Canada



Source: openpop.org

What About the Future?

- Worries
 - Climate change and resource depletion.
 - Increasing concentration of wealth
 - Weakening of democratic ideas
 - War, especially nuclear war

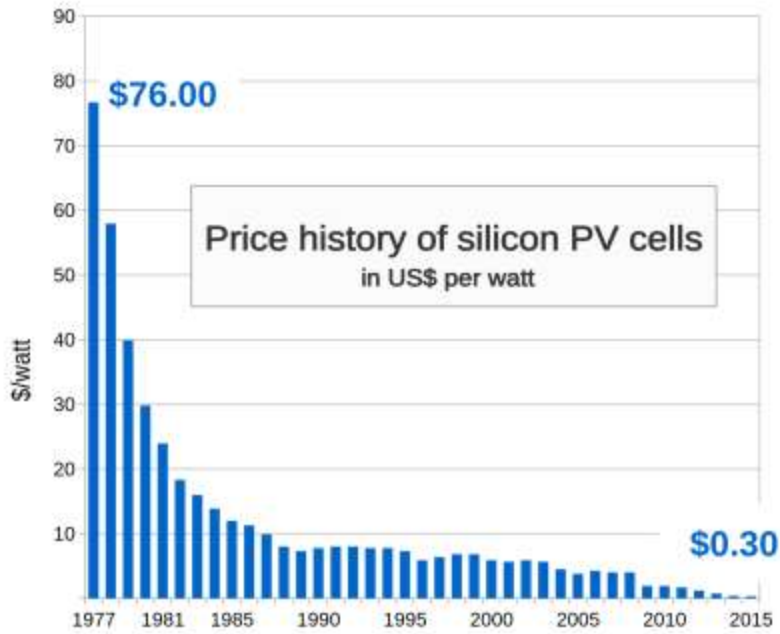
Confusion

- More attention being paid to problems is part of the solution, not a sign they are getting worse. Examples:
 - Conditions on first-nations reserves.
 - Sexism and racism.
 - Environmental degradation

Christopher Plummer on CBC: Sexual harrassment has been around “since the Phoenicians” and it’s high time it stopped.

Environment and Climate

- Very serious problems
- Signs that they are being addressed
 - International treaties
 - Carbon taxes
 - Technical developments, e.g.:
 - Lower cost solar and wind energy
 - Electric cars/transit
 - Greater efficiency across many industries



Source: Bloomberg New Energy Finance & pv.energytrend.com

Efficiency Example

- TV with picture tube
 - On: 90 W
 - Standby: 10 W
- LCD TV
 - On: 16 W
 - Standby: < 1 W



Still Optimistic?



Yes!



Paris climate change summit 2015. 194 countries signed, US only one to withdraw

Conclusions

- Avoid nostalgia
- Don't hold out for utopia
- Work towards progress

DON'T PANIC

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy

