**Online Appendix: "Interlocutors' Reflections on Left Pessimism and Political Science."**

**2.5.17**

During the summer of 2016, I sent the following questions to an array of political scientists and historians. I briefly explained the thesis of my forthcoming APSA presidential speech, and then asked:

* Do you agree that the academic left is more pessimistic than liberals have traditionally been understood to be and/or more pessimistic than the academic right, whatever that is?
* Why, or why not?
* Are there analytic frames or concepts or tools that political scientists can use to study or provide insight into this phenomenon? That is, I don’t want to argue that the left is correct or incorrect in its pessimism; I want to discuss the idea that this is a historically new or at least unusual phenomenon--and we political scientists are well suited to study it by doing XXX.

Twenty-nine responded.

I asked the final set of five correspondents a different question: What are political scientists doing to enhance participation in the public arena, teaching methods and content, student engagement etc., in the context of my theme of “left pessimism and political science? Can you suggest any initiatives that you or others are taking in the arenas of teaching and learning, broadly defined, to encourage students (and ourselves) to be more active, optimistic, forward-looking citizens?

The responses are below, lightly edited to correct typos or grammatical infelicities, and to eliminate extraneous comments or observations. In December 2016, I asked each interlocutor for retrospective permission to include his or her notes, and asked if they preferred acknowledgement or anonymity. A few revised their comments slightly for this new context. I present the comments in rough chronological order, since some writers were responding to previous observations from others that they had seen.

I hope that readers find this exchange as interesting and enlightening as I did. I am very grateful to everyone for their time and insights.

1. **Anonymous**

One might argue that left-pessimism is most common in democratic polities where progressive initiatives are underway but fall well short of accomplishing what their proponents desire. The Bolsheviks were not pessimists, but believed they were changing history, and until well into the 1930s continued under Stalin to think History was on their side and that world revolution under their leadership would come. That extreme example can remind us that the kind of polity we are taking about, and the extent to which proponents of a program have at their full disposal the instruments of the state, make a big difference. In the US, there were moments of left optimism in the mid-1930s, and again in the mid-1960s, when progressive initiatives were doing relatively well and many resources of the state were mobilized for them.

There is a good bit of left pessimism today in regard to ethnic/racial equality (one of the sectors you mention) because of the thwarting by Republicans of the Obama agenda, leading many on the left to come very close to saying (I have heard people right on the edge of saying this) that Obama's election was bad because it enabled so many people, especially centrists and rightists, to believe that progress was being made when actually it was not. Had Obama not been elected, it would be harder to conceal the brute realities of inequality, injustice, racism, etc., in American life, but his election gives people an excuse to ignore these realities. Left pessimism here takes the form of an attack on the very idea that progress is being made.

The situation is somewhat complicated by what has happened with regard to gay rights, where there is fierce opposition but still that opposition has been overcome again and again in the courts and in public opinion and in an openly gay Secretary of the Army. A reason this does not diminish left pessimism more than it does is that these gains are compatible with right-libertarianism and are largely (not entirely) gains achieved for whites well above the poverty line, a segment of the population less in need of other progressive programs.

I suggest, further, that left pessimism flourishes when inherited progressive programs appear to have reached the limit of their achievement and their proponents have not come up with anything new, resulting in an increasingly shrill defense of the old programs, an increasingly bitter attack on those who are skeptical about those programs, and a sharpened attack on the unwashed masses for their racism, conservatism, etc.

I think one of the most striking political phenomena of our time is the headlong flight away from rigorous study of the actual situation in the US and the substitution for it of something really, really different: the projecting on to the current situation a set of images and tropes from times past, so that the Black Lives Matter movement desperately tries to diminish the gap between the situation of blacks fifty years ago and the situation today, so people just love the revelation of police mistreatment of blacks (a real phenomenon, to be sure!) because it releases political emotions that are kept somewhat in check if we look at who is in the White House and how high the household income level is for Ethiopian and Kenyan immigrants, etc. Indications that class position rather than color makes a huge, huge difference are brushed aside in this environment and race is held up as the chief determinant and anyone who doubts this is scorned.

This is a variety of left pessimism, an almost pathological fear that too much progress is being made to justify the continuation of the old routines. Black students at Yale leave the impression that they are not much past Jim Crow. Poor Martha Minow is treated like a fascist. All this happens because of a deep cowardice, a persistent failure to look contemporary realities in the eye, and a will to pretend we are all living in the deep past. Desperately, desperately, we hope for another tape of another white cop shooting another black homeless person. If that happens, we can breathe easily again. We will be on familiar, confident ground. We don't have to pay attention to Glenn Loury and his kind.

1. **Anonymous**

Well, reality seems to be intruding, for one thing. Many relevant aspirations have been butting up against either a) nature or b) democracy, and nature and democracy have been winning. US schools seem to be as racially segregated as ever. The current campus demonstrations smack as much of desperation as of promise. Surges of wealth inequality here and abroad do not seem to have either limits or controllable causes. The EU is crumbling. It is not clear that multiculturalism has long-term survivability as an operative premise for a society. Democracy is coming to look like populist nationalism. In the USA, various difficulties used to be routinely assignable to bad processes--voter disfranchisement, campaign finance biggies, etc. But those old stories seem to be frazzling. Is Donald Trump a Citizens United-type problem? During just the last couple of months, the world's social democratic parties have suffered one of their worst serial lickings in history: Scotland (a wipeout), Brazil (a crumble), France (a huge fracture), Austria (a disaster). History hasn't been performing well in recent times.

What to do? Well, one idea is to take a good look at the progress/change aspirations. Subject them to feasibility tests that take into serious account both nature and democracy. (Your recent book with Katie Einstein points this way!)

I don't know how to compare with the "academic right.' I don't remember ever coming across much of one. Anyway, such folks seem to have such a fixation on getting stomped down by the "academic left" that pessimism sets an overall tone. As for the AR looking out at the world, I suppose that there isn't much cheering for progress or change in the AL sense anyway.

**Anon. 2:** This point would apply to everybody, not just liberals/progressives. Think about what Robert Lane and others in his genre write about measuring happiness. Beware of trying to measure it, or anything like it, across time. For one thing, ordinal beats cardinal. The noise of the lawnmower next door beats out memories of the Holocaust.

For liberals/progressives in particular: by nature, this is a critical tradition bent on discovering and exposing the illegitimacies of elites and hierarchies. That's always been the case; think about Schumpeter on the intelligentsia as the natural enemy of capitalism. American Democrats have always demonized banks and oil companies, etc. Who knows what those genomicists in their labs, probably in cahoots with government bureaucracies, are up to? Can the American state be trusted to deal with racism? Etc. In this critical tradition, exposure always carries the connotation, often against likelihood, of pleasing counterfactual states of affairs being attainable.

1. **Sanford Levinson, University of Texas at Austin**

Obviously, I'm one of the left pessimists, but, alas, I'm all too sure that I'm in a distinct minority re the specific reason. You can find in Balkinization two recent rants of mine that spell out my concerns. The latter of the two is a full-scale diatribe against Bernie as a fake "revolutionary" inasmuch as, unlike, say, Hamilton, he's not willing even to raise the possibility that our current constitutional order is "imbecilic" and therefore in need of significant constitutional reform. From my perspective, he's no better than Trump in adopting a thoroughly misleading notion of what he could actually do as president. The left used to think seriously about constitutional change. Now it is fixated on *Citizens United*, which needs only a new Supreme Court appointee to get rid of, and is otherwise uninterested in serious structural analysis. The new book by Terry Moe and Howell, *Relic*, is a welcome exception, but I wonder if it will get the attention it deserves.

**JLH:** another question: Were you always a left pessimist? If not, why were you an optimist at some point in the misty past? Or in other words, what changed you from optimism to pessimism?

**Levinson**: I was a left optimist after the 1964 election, and then Vietnam happened. But it really was sometime between 1987, when I "signed the Constitution" at the bicentennial exhibit in Philadelphia and 2003, when I refused to do so at the opening of the National Constitution Center because my central focus had shifted to the importance of structures in comparison with rights.

As I think about it, I probably was very optimistic after the 1992 election. I was very taken by Bill and Hillary. 1994 changed everything.

1. **Steven Teles, Johns Hopkins University**

I definitely think that criminal justice fits your model. As you might know, I have a book out now on why conservatives have switched directions on mass incarceration. A few years ago my co-author David Dagan and I published the attached, called “Locked In,” which addressed the “carceral state” literature. We take that literature to task for being too pessimistic about the possibilities of reducing mass incarceration, because (in our take) they have an excessively path dependent story of criminal justice. We argue that there are important “negative feedback” processes in mass incarceration, to go along with the positive feedback stories that they emphasize. In our telling, this emphasis on positive feedback leads them to stories in which the only way to roll back mass incarceration is through a kind of mass mobilization we haven’t seen since the civil rights era, and which we probably won’t see again. As a consequence, they missed out on the possibility that conservatives themselves might switch direction (which, I would emphasize, is not the case with many working public interest law types, who have recognized this switch and work hard to take advantage of it). Anyways, I think this fits the liberal pessimism framing.

**JLH:** This note, however, just deepens the puzzle for me; in the good old days (19th century utopians? Civil rights or other social movement activists?) “the left” were the ones who rejected path dependency, at least with regard to the future if not as a description of the past. It was “the right”, or conservatives, who argued that what had developed up to that point both was what would continue into the future and what should do so. Self-described reformers, in short, rejected path dependency - so why the recent reversal, at least re mass incarceration? And self-described conservatives promoted path dependency – so why the recent reversal, at least re mass incarceration?

**Teles**: I would think about distinguishing different parts of the left. My sense is that gay rights advocates, for instance, have had a sense that “history” was with them—a belief that they had the wind at their backs. But my sense is that advocates for African-Americans, especially around criminal justice, have had an opposite belief. I think this is probably a consequence of the intense sense going back to the ‘60s that the arc of history bends toward justice, followed by the collapse of so many parts of African-American life (the remarkable decline of family life in the African-American community, combined with the intense penetration of incarceration in the African-American community and the persistence of segregation). The belief that progress was inevitable just did not have a lot of oxygen to support it. So I’d distinguish parts of the left.

That said, I think that there are parallel trends on the right. Especially among social conservatives, I get a sense of profound pessimism, a belief that things are getting worse and there’s nothing they can do about it. Gay marriage, the persistence of abortion, transpeople in bathrooms (!)—all of this has been a series of body blows to the belief that history was on their side.

I think the important thing to get at here is this question of historical inevitability—do parts of the left believe that there’s a thing called “history” that has a trajectory of its own, that we can help speed up but that has a dynamic of its own. Marxists clearly had a theory along these lines, as did (in its own related way) believers in “modernity.” But do we still believe in big-H history? I think you’re right that there’s a kind of pessimism that has taken hold as the belief in big-H history has declined, but one that hasn’t been accompanied by an increasing faith in human agency, the belief that we make our own world through concerted human action, cunning strategy, etc. So what’s left is a belief that inequality has deep structural sources that we can do little about.

The last point is that I think that this pessimistic theory of history—which we can see very clearly in the carceral state literature—is accompanied by a belief that it is a sign of greater radicalism to have an even more pessimistic, structurally determined account of the sources of inequality. A belief that concerted human action could change things in a humane direction is a sign of being “liberal,” now taken to be a bad word. Oddly, the more you believe that only cataclysmic change—revolution, mass revolt, etc.—can break through the path dependent quality of social structures, the more it leads you toward either quietism or a turning away from mainstream forms of political action. That’s why I think there’s also a romanticization of social movement activism.

The alternative, of course, is crafty strategy, looking for tiny cracks in social structures that you can pry open through intelligent tactics and persistent action, looking for contradictions in social structures that, if you take enough time, can produce major change. But I think that kind of political orientation is somewhat alien to the most politically charged students, in part because crafty strategy requires compromise, making coalitions with people who you otherwise despise, accepting half a loaf in the hopes that changes you create now can open up more space later, etc.

**Teles**: one thing I’d add, following Ken’s useful note below, is that social science can both be “apolitical” while also making substantial suggestions for social reform and embedding itself in insulated institutions IF you believe that History has a logic in which it is possible to know what is “progressive” as well as reactionary. I think this tendency to be both political and anti-political also makes sense (as I argue in *The Rise of the Conservative Legal Movement*) if you understand that so much of the power of modern liberalism comes from taking effective control of professions—so liberals got control of, say, the law schools, but had to simultaneously say that its control was not just normal party politics. I think if conservatives did anything, they punctured the idea of an obviously trans-political understanding of progress, at least in economics/welfare state issues (I think that’s still clearly evident in issues like sexual preference).

1. **Mark Graber, University of Maryland**

I am not sure the academic left is more or less pessimistic than at any previous point in history. I really need to get out more to determine that. But I think a strong case might be made of the declining influence of the academic left, in politics, in political culture and, perhaps most important, in our own institutions. Consider briefly:

1. The increased, to say the least, influence of money on politics, and politics more focused on what money can buy. As American politics becomes an ever increasing fund-raising exercise the distinctive skills of academics, except those with specialized campaign expertise, becomes irrelevant to the process. Here there is actually something that can be studied. One might compare the role of left academics in politics in countries where campaign spending is reined in. Or more generally how academics orient to more and less driven money driven politics.

2. I've wondered about the influence of the internet and blogs. On the one hand, we get more platforms to dispense wisdom. On the other hand, the internet to some degree is democratic to an extreme. A very high percentage of the population can use the same vehicle. Moreover, there is no gatekeeping and no good way to test for accuracy. In short, on the internet, academic knowledge is not particularly special.

3. Consider the conditions of our work, particularly when you get outside of Harvard/Yale. Maryland is typical. We have witnessed a massive increase of administration (and administrative salaries). Most of them have little interest in traditional pedagogy or research. Some of them are very good people who will get to heaven long before I do. They want the university out in the community, tutoring children, giving free haircuts (if we are a barber school), offering free legal services . . . . But an increased number of faculty I have spoken to throughout the country believe there are no longer people at their universities who are interested in their ideas. In short, it is not simply that we are being pushed to the margins on politics (where we were never at the core), but a great many left academics are being pushed to the margins of the universities.

4. And bluntly, outside of Harvard, most of us are being pushed to the margins of political science. Our deans want "value-neutral" grant funded research. You can get away with your research at Harvard, but not in the Maryland Government department. And our kind of research has no support in the new public university.

Sorry for a screed. But increasingly my theme is the loss of the distinct values of a university throughout the United States and I think your concerns are not entirely distinct.

**JLH**: Bonus question: Is this a general point about the decline of status/influence/power of academics, in comparison with administrators/politicians/other internet users? or a more particular point about the especially steep decline of the academic left? (or the social sciences and humanities, which comes to much the same thing).

**Graber**: I was starting to think of Hofstadter's status anxiety with respect to the progressives.

I was also thinking about the academic left in law schools. Recent events, at least at our law school, is empowering the left understood as our clinical faculty. I think their frustrations are different than those of us who do traditional teaching and research.

But the idea is something like this, the academic left, understood as liberal professors who dedicated a good deal of their life to traditional teaching and research are experiencing dramatic changes in the very mission of universities, changes that are being driven by broader political phenomenon, that leave them feeling increasingly marginalized both at the institutions in which they work and the broader world.

I think conservative politics has a different structure, with the result being some conservatives feel less marginalized politically.

1. **Naomi Graber, University of Georgia**

I'm generally more familiar with the artistic-activist left than the academic left, and most of my work focuses on the lives of German émigrés to the United States during the 1930s-1950s, so I'm not sure if I can help, but I'll play devil's advocate nonetheless...

The Old Left certainly went through several spasms of "pessimism," but I suppose it depends on exactly what you consider the U.S. academic leftist tradition. There was a massive wave of pessimism in the exile communities in the United States from 1933-1950 as it became more and more apparent that the liberal project of the Weimar Republic degenerated into fascism (Theodore Adorno, for example), but I'm not sure if you consider that part of the tradition you're studying. In terms of artistic communities, the end of the 1930s were pretty rough. The end of Leftist and Progressive organizations like the Group Theatre and the Federal Theatre Project left a lot of artists feeling like the Leftist project had failed, and that went hand-in-hand with the realization that the Soviet Union wasn't the socialist paradise they thought it was, which was deeply disturbing to a lot of people. Still, I have no idea how that played out in the academy.

There was also a pretty profound drop in optimism after the failure of the Henry Wallace Campaign in 1948. I've read some of *New York Times* music critic's Olin Downes’ thoughts on the subject in his private correspondence, and he sounds remarkably like contemporary Sanders supporters. Then, of course, there was the HUAC/Hollywood 10/Blacklist, which made a lot of composers/artists/writers VERY pessimistic (see the writings of Paul Robeson and Zero Mostel's testimony to the HUAC). Is it possible academic voices of pessimism were silenced in that era?

1. **Rodney Hero, University of California at Berkeley**

Who/what comprises "the left?" Is it (social science) scholars, public intellectuals, some set of government officials? Does their pessimism apply (equally) to the several domains you note? What is the time frame that demarcates the (primary) period you are referring to? For what it's worth, I have some reservations about lumping liberals and progressive academics together. I think there is considerable variation, especially around issues of 'diversity,' affirmative action, etc.-- what should/can be done; how it is to be done, etc.

I'm not sure "pessimism"/[optimism] is the best framing of what you're getting at; but let's say it is, and it is essentially your dependent variable. What are the sources of pessimism, etc. is what I take to be the core of your analysis. I've wondered whether thinking about these phenomena in absolute/relative terms is part of what's going on.

How does pessimism differ from discouragement or discouraging events, disappointment or disappointing outcomes, and the like? Is it really just 'realism' (cf. Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels, *Democracy for Realists*)? Pessimism may be rooted in the gap between "reality and rising expectations," as some sought to explain the late 1960s riots, after the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act in 1964 and 19 65 – [that is, the opposite of optimism may be] as much (or more) frustration as pessimism.

A major underlying premise of political science (and other disciplines) is, at least implicitly, optimistic or melioristic, it seems to me. That is, through careful study, seeking to explain, and leading to understanding, things will somehow be better in some broad sense. The pessimism you identify may partly be focusing on the" trend line as it goes down," or doesn't go up much, or fast enough, while optimism focuses on the upside. There is usually some of both at the same time, and we can examine things differently, e.g. absolutely or relatively). And there are multiple trend lines occurring at any point in time; which we choose to emphasize is part of the story (for example, gay rights v. race issues in the last year or so).

Another thought is something that one political scientist talked about in an urban politics book. To understand urban politics and structures, he argued that two dimensions are useful to think about: traditional versus modern outlooks, on the one hand; and recognition or diminution of (social) "difference" on the other hand. Based on that, he presented a 2X2 table, and concluded that urban arenas could be thought of as "village," "machine," "reform," "post-reform." (Like you, and him, I find 2X2 tables very useful.) I wonder if you could identify/develop a couple of dimensions central to the formation of "liberal pessimism," and other contrasting orientations. These dimensions may apply, to some degree; I'd have to think about this more.

1. **Peter Hall, Harvard University**

Maybe it because, unlike in the 1930s, progressives no longer believe that the collapse of capitalism will usher in revolution.

In case they are useful, note three other documents each of which bears on these issues (I think) in one way or another. One is my brief memoir of Stanley Hoffmann to come out in *Commentaire* this summer which, by coincidence, speaks directly to the issues of optimism/pessimism you raise. The second is my essay of ten years ago on “The Dilemmas of Contemporary Social Science” which, as it turns out, also bears on your theme, although I would certainly add much to it if I were writing it today. And the third, perhaps least relevant but with some references that fill out a few comments in my note to you, is an essay now online and done a couple of years ago for the SSRC ‘Anxieties of Democracy’ project.

**Hall, 2:** My initial reaction to this as a theme is one of fascinated horror. Fascinated because it is a truly innovative and intriguing issue. I find myself very interested in what you or others would have to say about it. So that bodes well. Horror because I am not at all sure there is a ‘there’ there and I worry a little about professional omphaloskepsis. My views about that might vary depending on whether you see the address as more of an exercise in the sociology of knowledge or one that takes off from your basic observation to consider whether progressive change is still possible. However, I currently assume more of the former since the latter is a big and potentially intractable, if important, topic indeed. That said, one purpose of these addresses is to shake people out of their torpor and make them think in new ways, and this has the potential to do that.

Is the academic liberal/left more pessimistic now than it used to be? My impressionistic answer depends on how one defines the components of that question, namely: the academic left, pessimism about what, and compared to when.

Let’s assume we are talking about American academic liberals (rather than Marxists, say) and about a tempered faith in progress. Well, compared to the early 1960s, yes, it is more pessimistic. Why? On my (possibly faulty) reading, in the early 1960s, political scientists of almost all persuasions were much taken with various theses about ‘modernization’ which were intrinsically optimistic (Moore and Huntington provided counterpoints from different implicit political positions) and the American civil rights movement as well as the feminist movement were yielding real fruit especially gratifying for the left.

What about the late 1960s/1970s? Well, by then the Vietnam War had diminished most people’s faith in progress, although in many ways the critique of it was fueled by an idealism that was intrinsically optimistic (as we will both recall). The 1970s brought economic downturn and worries about ‘overloaded government’ although the latter was an emanation mainly of the center right and soon followed, in Europe, by the ‘new social movements’ that had a similar idealism and some similar, if spotty, success.

I am not sure about the 1980s/90s. What were the striking works of political science bearing on these issues then? Perhaps Putnam on social capital – generally a rather pessimistic view on my reading – a kind of inexorable decline even if not presented entirely as such. But my stuff with Soskice and multiple others, and perhaps the field of comparative political economy as a whole which grew up in that era, tends to be relatively optimistic in its view that there are at least two routes to economic success, including one that was seen to be highly egalitarian. The emergence of the ‘third wave’ of democratization and political science arguments about them (including the normally pessimistic Huntington as well as the celebratory Fukuyama) reflected a generalized optimism seemingly borne out by events.

Today? Well, I am not sure. I feel that I do not have an adequate grip on the broad work/trends in the discipline to have a good read of this. Am I more pessimistic? Certainly I am. As a child of the 1960s, I espouse a political science (if you will accept that peculiar verb here) that is founded on an intrinsic idealism and desire for/almost faith in progress. Partly for that reason, I have long been somewhat critical of highly rationalist views of politicians as purely opportunistic maximizers of their own utility. But I find myself (literally) thinking that those views have more purchase over politics in more countries than I once thought they did.

Is this pessimism justified? This is where I think you face the trickiest analytical issues if you draft an address along these lines. It will be difficult (and perhaps incomplete/nonsensical) to discuss rising/falling pessimism without saying something (albeit perhaps limited/short) about whether there is any real-world basis for such changes, especially in the current period. If you do not, the danger is that people will attribute to you the view (which perhaps you hold and perhaps reasonably) that real-world politics does not change a lot over time on these dimensions, such that the views of academics can be analyzed somewhat separately from that.

But real-world politics does change, at least in some significant ways if not in its basic nature. The democracies that Fukuyama saw as tantamount to the ‘end of history’ are often now backsliding into semi-authoritarianism (Russia, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Turkey, etc.). The Middle East is yielding something uncannily like Huntington’s ‘clash of civilizations’ and is commensurately hard to cope with as compared to the materialist politics of earlier eras. Democracy is not working especially well in Europe or the US, where we see the rise of dangerous right-wing populism as a reaction partly to that and partly to economic developments. It is not at all clear (though eminently debatable) that the developed economies can yield in the coming years anything like the rates of growth we have seen even in the recent past. We could be in for a long period of really ugly politics on both the domestic and international planes.

Should we lose faith (in progress)? Well, perhaps not if political science is a religious endeavor. But most of us think it is not that. And there are plenty of good grounds for expecting little of what liberal academics would call progress in the coming years.

That said, as I imagine you think, there are still signs of and room for ‘progress’. I think the rise of identity politics is a double-edged sword but, on the back of generational change, it has cut some large swathes through embedded forms of discrimination and prejudice. After thirty years of neoliberal doctrine, people’s beliefs about what states can accomplish are at a relatively low ebb, but there are important signs of rebellion against this, e.g. in Hacker/Pierson, *American Amnesia*, and others as well as the Sanders campaign. As Milankovic reminds us, globalization may have reduced the rate of growth or real wages of the lower and middle classes in the developed world but it has lifted hundreds of millions out of poverty in the developing world. So there are certainly grounds for thinking that progress on multiple fronts is still possible. And indeed I think that, which tempers my own pessimism.

Are there analytic frames with which one can chart/explain changing levels of optimism/pessimism among liberal academics? A very interesting question. And, if you can make progress on this front, that might amply justify the address on this theme.

I would like to know the answer to that and feel I do not have a good grip on it. I am not sure that Alvin Gouldner on the ‘new class’ is especially relevant. Max Weber has an essay on the democratic constitution of Weimar that is widely read (as I dimly recall) as pessimistic. And this makes me think that the optimism/pessimism of liberal political science may turn heavily on their views about how well ‘democracy’ is working. But I cannot think of anyone who has said just this. I recall a conversation some years ago with the philosopher Robert Pippin (at Chicago) in which he remarked on the paradox that, in the late 19th century, just as so much real-world progress had been made and (more important for him) Western thought (e.g. Hegel/Kant/Mill) had developed strong justifications for optimistic views, that thought suddenly turned pessimistic (in the form of Nietzsche and others that issue in Husserl and Heidegger). He wondered why. I think that is a fascinating issue and I wonder if he ever wrote about it. You or I could ask him if you want. José Ortega y Gasset, *The Treason of the Clerks* may be relevant as well. Certainly, Walter Benjamin.

Although not all that helpful, the last paragraph at least suggests that this pessimism is not entirely new if we move beyond the post-war years. Maybe, if pessimism is on the rise as it may well be, this is yet another reflection of the ‘end’ of some post-war parenthesis marked by relatively high rates of growth, democratization, relative peace, etc. and the return to a more ‘normal’ economics and politics of which we are not so fond, as the famous charts of Thomas Piketty and others would seem to imply.

As you can see, I think more out of a comparativist’s range of reference and I think some Americanist concerns animate your thinking, quite rightly. On very limited knowledge, I would tend to think that we need not be so pessimistic about racial politics in the US but on that you are the authority. In case it is useful to say, I did find myself wondering what this has to do with genomic science. I have not read a lot about that. Is it the case that Michael Sandel and others see Armageddon in our capacities to alter genetic codes? If so, I guess I would think that our capacities to deal with the threats posed by nuclear weapons may provide an appropriate analogue that might temper pessimism.

So there you have it. Ruminations to feed into your ruminations (let us not think too much about cows here). The bottom line? As you can see, I see some difficulties with pursuing this theme but I also find it rather fascinating. So I will be really interested in what you make of it and, if you want comments on some later version, do not hesitate to ask.

**JLH:** was there a clear successor to modernization theory in comparative politics? I don’t think “dependency theory,” which, as I understand it, was a direct reaction against modernization theory, ever had the wide following that Edward Shils, Lucian Pye et al. had – is that right? Ditto “post-colonial theory”. So my intuition is that the field split into several directions – is that right, or am I missing a big successor? If the idea of split is right, what other fragments were prominent?

**Hall:** If you were talking about the OECD countries, the 1970s saw an influential literature on ‘governmental overload’ of which you likely know. Re the developing world someone like Jorgé Dominguez or Steven Levitsky would be better informants. I think dependency theory was relatively influential along with the literature on bureaucratic authoritarianism but then succeeded by the work the ‘third wave’ of democracy.

In the developed countries, the 1980s saw a move to the study of comparative political economy, inspired partly by ‘bringing the state back in’ as a response to ‘pluralism’.

1. **Nancy Rosenblum, Harvard University**

I think this is a terrific topic, and a manageable one. I can’t do much more than itemize some thoughts about why progressives are less optimistic than conservatives. Great way to explore politics and political science.

Just to say at the start that this is a psychological reversal – enlightenment/progressive/utopian is by definition on the side of history (and not apocalyptic history); conservatism is by definition resistant to deliberate attempts at social engineering and change for the better. Those are historical constants. Which suggests that American/contemporary progressive/conservative have changed from their 18th, 19th, even early 20th century precursors. This might be an interesting “way in” to your talk.

So here are my thoughts. First, we all live today in the shadow of increasing nuclear threats (weapon proliferation and miniaturization) and climate change. These don’t stop some from imaging technological fixes and a green utopia. But for thinking people, these are catastrophic problems for which we don’t have good solutions just now, and certainly no political will in democracies to address them. These are not core liberal/progressive issues, but they are in the background and it is fair to say that progressives are more willing to acknowledge them and the challenges than are conservatives. So that’s the atmosphere that is inescapable.

Second, many if not most progressive scenarios in the past were tied to technological progress, which usually disappoints. That’s the case here. True, the Gates Foundation attack on some diseases is progress. But medicine and the internet have not delivered cures or platforms for democratic mobilization (and sustaining it) as hoped. Except for technology-fix people, science comes today with the two faces it usually has – out of control/unforeseen consequences on the one side and yes, definite contributions on the other, but not easily or obvious. You know this from the gene side.

So, what about core progressive concerns? If you take the key ones, it’s no mystery that optimism flags. Race, obviously – still extreme and disproportionate poverty, still abuse in criminal so-called justice, still many dimensions of racism (made worse by expectations of its disappearance). (Though take account of Sandy Jencks’ work on the actual comparative state of things). And, this is important I think, the “root causes”, which we thought could be addressed by education, are not responsive. True, education has not been well tried everywhere, or only small scale experiments, but few argue today that it is a panacea – the peaceful, enlightened solution hoped for. I think proposals for more and reformed education, while obviously important, are met with sinking feelings.

The inequality side – all the data on its increase – with both no ceilings and no floors is the second core reason for pessimism. Our attention has been drawn to both sides now: the greed and limitlessness of the very rich (and how they are served politically, from taxes to the protection of foundations) and of the poor. And now add the middle class. These are not insoluble things, but the political will here is lacking. You’d want to say something about Sanders’ campaign. It has spurred excitement but the disproportion between problem and his proposed solutions, combined with their untenability, is dispiriting and likely to cause deeper disappointment. I’m reminded of the Jewish joke about food at the resort: tastes like poison and the portions are so small.

You might want to say something about feminism and women. Here there has been some progress (even more re LGBT) but also plateaued re: help for families (See Theda Skocpol on Clinton, the egalitarian). And in some cases regression – as in abortion rights. That’s terrifying and goes on despite the existence of strong organizations.

Then there are the missing actors. Who carries progressive banners today? The social structures for it have been eroded. The classes and associations that are natural flag bearers are weak. Alex Gourevitch has written on this, and Yascha Mounk – two young theorists of the generation who care and want to find solutions. There is a lot on this, as you know, but I think work of younger scholars, not older nostalgics, might serve you best.

One more thing: all the “anxieties of democracy” projects are essentially about this. They come at it from a liberal democratic standpoint. The assumption, correct, is that progressivism depends on democracy. The projects, like the big SSRC one are good evidence of the fact of progressive pessimism and what political science is saying about it. The diagnoses are out there, and reasonably consistent. The prescriptions less certain, as I’ve suggested with the example of education. Its weakness is for acknowledging and paying the costs of progress, and [add to this,] the view that globalization has to some extent neutered the force of domestic democratic politics anyway.

There’s more to say about American foreign policy, and you should probably touch on that. It’s likely where right and left have cross-cutting cleavages of pessimism.

**Rosenblum:** I had another thought about the historical reversal of pessimism/optimism. If historically these positions were progressive-optimistic, conservative – pessimistic, then we should revert to the historical norm. It’s deeply embedded in doctrine and psychology. So that’s hopeful — progressives will return to hopefulness. Yeah!

1. **Anonymous**

It is easy to see there's plenty of pessimism going around, but not easy to say it is more on the academic left than the academic right, or unusually intense relative to the past. My best guess is that Trumpism is a major driver of discontent on both the academic left and right. And I wonder if this moment is worse or just different than Nixon's presidency.

1. **Anonymous**

I guess my big point would be to ask you to define who you mean by liberal progressives. By emphasizing the newness of left pessimism, it seems like you are emphasizing the strand of progressivism (which is probably dominant in political science) that is associated with ‘progress’, a linear drive towards a better society, and one that is often attached to the promise of technology/modernization/empirical science.

But I’m not sure that this is where the ‘pessimism’ is coming from in academia. Fights over new technology seem pretty longstanding within other wings of the left, from fights against free trade, Frankenstein/Orwellian scenarios involving state power and attacks on individualism/privacy, to a longstanding fight against quantitative and economic approaches in the study of politics. Political science doesn’t even really have much of a post-modern tradition beyond a few people, but that’d provide an even stronger attack against the scientific method.

Although I don’t feel a threat to historical research, I do respect the feeling among some qualitative scholars who feel beleaguered and marginalized in the profession. The numbers of methodological pluralists seem to be dwindling, and my fear in all of this is that while I support all methods being improved and empowered to enhance our substantive understanding of politics, there’s others pushing for pretty extreme methodological orthodoxy who would be happy to do away with all forms of qualitative work.

It’s a tougher question with race, but there the debates are meaningfully different. There, the move to understand race as a construction is dominant, and scientific racism (or anything that smacks of it) has a history that is difficult to dislodge and allow for new analysis. Even the empiricists among the race scholars tend to embrace this paradigm.

**JLH:** really helpful, very many thanks. You are right that I need to disaggregate “left” and “pessimism” (and maybe “academia”). However, others are pressing me to think more globally – why pessimism in Europe? how does Syrian war affect pessimism in US? etc. This address is going to end up several hours long, or would if I had enough to say.

One more query: it is my somewhat uninformed intuition that the current forms of pessimism on the left, or at least among left academics (variously defined) is historically unusual if not unprecedented. That is, I think of scientists in the 19th century, inventers of the new social sciences in early 20th century, Progressives, 1930s US Communists, 1960s radicals etc. as having some sort of optimism or faith or commitment that not only did things need to be changed, but that they *could* be changed, in particular by the likes of us through our actions.

That is too much of a generalization, of course, but isn’t it roughly true that the academic left has generally been identified with progress, change, inventing anew, dawn of a new age, and all that? That is what I see as missing these days in the academic or even much of the political/activist left. OR, am I being naively nostalgic in a way that drives me nuts when others do that?

**Anon., 2:** Although it wouldn’t be academic specific, you might glance at national opinion polls about optimism. As for academics, the short of it is that I don’t know. I think there’s still a belief in the use of academia for certain forms of progress—we even saw that, if briefly, when Michael LaCour’s work was first being broadcast last year and the seemingly positive findings it was offering. To be an academic is to believe in the power of knowledge to make change for the good, right?

It could be that left wing academics don’t really have a social movement to help drive their optimism as they have in the past? Movements were promoting the optimism, and left academics were participating. Today, you can find some of that, but perhaps more of the time is focused on stopping conservative retrenchment and backlash, and not without good reason. On the issue of race, for instance, we’ve gone from the high of Obama’s post-racial election to a low that has to be fairly unprecedented in the last 40 years or so. It’s hard not to be pessimistic at the moment on what has happened to the supposed post-racial order.

1. **Kathleen Thelen, M.I.T.**

Given that this is speech to the whole political science community (and possibly also broader public), it might be good to at least touch on some of the world events about which liberals (maybe not just liberals) are feeling somewhat pessimistic. You will think of others, but my list would include the humanitarian catastrophe in Syria and the associated refugee crisis in Europe. These events inspire pessimism to the extent that they call into question the capacity of the international community and the organizations it has created (UN, EU etc) to manage the big challenges. And of course your speech will be coming in the middle of a domestic election in which Donald Trump is the Republican nominee--another development about which many progressives might feel somewhat pessimistic, e.g., about the quality of democracy in the US.

And of course the main thing, as your note itself suggests, is for you make clear who exactly you mean when you refer to the academic "right." It is not entirely intuitive and I don't know that people necessarily self-identify in that way (I could be wrong), so you will have to make clear who you place in that category.

The deepest pessimism as far as i can tell is centered on how on earth the US political system managed to produce an outcome like Trump (and particularly what the Trump phenomenon says about issues of race in the US -- his latest statements on that have gotten tremendous play here in Europe, as of course they have in the US as well). So there is great pessimism on this side of the Atlantic, as well, on the current state of politics in the most powerful country in the world.

1. **Kenneth Prewitt, Columbia University**

The question itself is sufficiently thought provoking that it is worth sharpening and addressing even if no clear answer emerges in time for APSA (or ever).

Maybe because my current focus -- at least in my Columbia University role -- is global more than American-centric, my thoughts drift to international affairs more than local challenges, leading me to hypothesize that the optimistic track is more secure when discourse is self-centered ("make America great again"), on the left and right, even as it has turned more pessimistic re our capacity to cure the world's ills. Obama's "lead from behind" so mocked by the right media was not replaced by the right, or left, with demand for a more robust foreign policy to make the world safe for democracy or even safe for free market capitalism.

Trump's wall notwithstanding, the majority doesn't expect to send 11 million back home and does know that integration (and Americanization) will work its magic this century as before. But watching Europe struggle and even splinter, and China buy up Africa's mineral resources, and the seemingly intractable mess in the Islamic world is enough to shake anyone's faith that better days are ahead.

Put differently, there is a right and left, and a here and a there. If, as I believe, you cannot unpack your question by only focusing on US social welfare policy, it's unlikely that you can get to a convincing yes/no answer. We are all Burkeans when faced with conditions that are so incoherent (more not fewer nuclear weapons, in more hands) or internally inconsistent (Europe's non-replacement fertility levels either means opening up to African immigrants or running a tourist trade so huge that what's left of the European labor force will be in the tourist industry) that you can only throw up your hands in dismay.

I don't know whether the turn to "fix our problems at home," despite its irrationality in a globalizing world, is optimistic or pessimistic, but it seems to me that it has to somehow fit into your brave (some, but not me, might say foolhardy) exploration.

**JLH:** One more query: it is my somewhat uninformed intuition that the current forms of pessimism on the left, or at least among left academics (variously defined and understood), is historically unusual if not unprecedented. That is, I think of scientists in the 19th century, inventers of the new social sciences in early 20th century, Progressives, 1930s US Communists, 1960s radicals etc. as having some sort of optimism or faith or commitment that not only did things need to be changed, but that they could be changed, in particular by the likes of us through our actions. This point may even hold outside the U.S.

It is too much of a generalization, of course, but isn’t it roughly true that the academic left has generally been identified with progress, change, inventing anew, dawn of a new age, and all that? That is what I see as missing these days in the academic or even much of the political/activist left. OR, am I being naively nostalgic in a way that drives me nuts when others do that?

**Prewitt:** the history of the social sciences, as I read it, is consistent with fixing the world, but less in left/right terms than via other dichotomies. This over-simplifies, but:

Starting early, in the 1880's, it was religious vs. secular authority, that is, who was best positioned to opine on the social problems of the day (child labor, alcoholism, etc.), which in short order was joined by the search for an apolitical (that is, non-advocacy) science that would offer dispassionate advice to the country. To achieve this goal, social science/positivism blended two missions: how to build a better science with how to build a better society. This flowed into the progressive moment, which was as much about reforming government as improving social conditions -- and now the call is for expertise to replace corrupt partisan politics. Somehow, social science would gain legitimacy and influence by being "above politics" even though engaging what was clearly a political project. The enormously influential Rockefeller money that flowed generously in the 1920's (Laura Spellman Fund) always had two goals in mind -- strengthen science so it could strengthen polity, economy, and society. It stopped short, but only barely so, of social engineering. In this sense, it was liberal. But it stopped well to the right of socialism. In this sense it was conservative.

Think about Boas and W. I. Thomas, and the de-throning of biologically rooted race science to make way for a social science, in which social determinants explain social conditions. I guess you could label this optimistically leftish, but then the de-throned eugenics movement was also an 'optimistic' project to make a better world.

I don't know whether to label this founding period as left or right; it was Hoover, from the White House, who sponsored the first project that could rightly be labeled "big social science." Though *Recent Social Trends* was ignored by FDR, he did not ignore its social science authors but brought them into government in order to (everyone's favorite examples) design the social security system and relevant economic measures. This period fits your description of an optimistic, fix the world, liberal agenda.

Social scientists were marshaled for the War effort -- especially what came to be known as "regional studies" and the intelligence agencies, precursor to the CIA. Again, I cannot easily map the left/right terminology to this project, but it certainly was motivated by the sense that knowledge could be used to win a war -- as the physicists and mathematicians demonstrated to wide applause.

In fact, I read the social science history from 1880's to 1960's as resting on a faith in an "apolitical science," less, I think, than on a particular political ideology. (I've written on this stuff, and will send an essay or two if you want to dig in a bit deeper -- or, for a really serious dig, I can send citations to the literature I mainly summarized.)

Matters get more complicated when we get to the beginnings of really big social science, when we were signed up (by government and foundations) to help with the Great Society. The Coleman Report (600k students, 60k teachers, and 6k schools -- certainly the biggest social science project ever mounted to that time, unless, as I do, you label the census a social science project) was optimistically liberal -- [promoting] racial integration -- but its findings were as readily applied by the right (Moynihan on “the negro family" and later, Coleman’s white flight formulation of the bussing effort) as by the left. Then came the flood of big studies on social welfare issues -- the first social experiments, longitudinal studies (some continue), and the huge growth of think-tanks -- creating what I have described as a "policy enterprise". This policy enterprise rather quickly developed a left and a right set of actors, with the neoconservatives using social science, brilliantly at times, to discredit the Great Society via the introduction of such metaphors as unintended consequences and perverse incentives.

To bring this up to today, developments such as the misleadingly labeled evidence-based-policy movement, the “what works” clearing house, performance metrics and nudge theory are, as I see them, an attempt to get back to apolitical advice and a more efficient government. As such, they have proponents on the left and right. In the meantime, smarter minds on the right ignore this tinkering at the edges, and advance by re-framing policy itself -- regulations are job-destroying; spending private money is a first amendment right. You've recently had a dose of this in reading Hacker and Pierson on how we lost the mixed-economy, bi-partisan agreement. But I don't see how you can claim that the claim "get government off our backs so that the market can make us happy and rich" is inherently pessimistic or optimistic. We may see it as a disaster, but then its authors, social scientists among them, saw the Great Society as a disaster.

1. **Ira Katznelson, SSRC**

In thinking about issues of pessimism on the Left (or elsewhere) about the capacities for government to find solutions to large public issues, I think that in addition to the kinds of distinctions between types of Left and between time periods, it might also make sense to consider three different types of sensibility that govern political goals,

One of these is the most familiar, a pragmatic orientation that looks to normal politics--parties, elections, lawmaking in Congress, etc.--to create reform and progressive change. That requires faith in the system's openness, fairness, and rules of the game, precisely what currently seems absent on both the right and left.

Second is an orientation to imagine leaps in possibility and sensibility of the kind that have motivated social movements for equality in gender, race, sexuality and, earlier, religion. Here the left has been remarkably successful, but the successes, especially regarding race, have both provoked a backlash and have revealed just how much remains to be done regarding poverty, incarceration, enduring segregation, social isolation for many, etc. The very unevenness of impact has generated fresh bursts of pessimism.

There also is a third sensibility aimed at preventing the enemies of decent change from gaining traction. During the Obama presidency there have been a wide range of quite successful efforts at negation-- the Tea Party and more-- leading to a mobilization that has put more and more state governments, even in once progressive states like Wisconsin, in hands that seek to undermine a wide variety of gains toward equality.

For each of these, the radical decline of labor--once, at least in the CIO, the most powerful force for cross-racial progressive politics--has left whites and blacks, both with stagnant incomes, without means of institutional collaboration. In the late 1970s, an attempt was initiated under the heading of Progressive Alliance, with the UAW playing a key role, to build a collective capability for the left that would include unions, the Democratic Party, civil rights groups, and a wide array of community organizations. The effort collapsed when the UAW decided to back the Ted Kennedy insurgency.

A key question for today on the left is whether such a collective effort can be mounted drawing together both the disparate organizations and sensibilities on the left, working together with a committed intellectual class, to develop fresh ideas while reviving faith in the core institutions of democratic life.

1. **Alex Keyssar, Harvard University**

First, I do agree with you that the left and left-academics have, in general, had an optimistic strain to their thinking, that we believed that progress (as we defined it) was possible and would happen (sooner or later). I think that for everyone who was significantly influenced by Marxism (myself included), this type of optimism was somewhat present: Marxism was a scathing indictment of capitalism but promised light at the end of the tunnel.

I also agree that the optimism goes way back, into the 19th century and is transnational, certainly. A lot of that optimism came from a 19th century sense that historians and social science were trying to understand the “laws of human history” – to understand the fundamental dynamics of change. BUT there was also a somewhat darker, less optimistic strain (in a certain way) which shows up with Darwinism and social Darwinism. The social Darwinists believed that we could understand change by thinking in terms of evolution and the struggle for survival, but that we should not think of intervening in social or political matters with that knowledge.. We couldn’t and should do anything purposive about this (they’re kind of like a lot of economists today--don’t interfere with the market). So, in that sense, Sumner, at Yale, was quite pessimistic.

Then the early 20th century progressives discarded social Darwinism, rediscovered purposive action, and definitely did become more optimistic. (Do you know Walter Lippmann’s book *Drift and Mastery*? Might be relevant here)

Another person to think about (in part because I think he may also have been president of the APSA) was Charles Beard. Serious optimism there, I think; seeing everything as a struggle between progressive and conservative forces, and progressives were gradually winning.

I think there is a pessimism now among left academics, that stems partly from the collapse of intellectual constructs that had made us optimistic and partly from our increasing disconnection from social and political movements – and particularly from social movements that people on the left thought would win: the labor movement, civil rights, the women’s movement.

**Keyssar, 2:** “Left” could be defined as being people who think that economic, social, and political power need to be redistributed in favor of those people who have less of that power now. People who think that all three (or more) kinds of power and influence are too concentrated among elites in the society.

If one deploys that definition, then the sources of pessimism come a bit more clearly (and maybe simple-mindedly) into focus: compared to the 1960s and 1970s, and to many early periods, that redistribution hasn’t happened; indeed, changes have been going in the opposite direction. In the US, for example, think of income and wealth distribution and also of schools: in the north, at least, there was a lot of confidence in public schools in the 1950s and 1960s. I speak as a product of the Newark school system.

More globally, again if one takes 1960-70 as one’s base point, there was an optimism that came from the apparent end of imperialism, throughout the world. The Vietnam war was a horror for all of us, but in a sense the Vietnamese victory was a source of optimism; so were the African liberation movements of the 1950s, the Algerian defeat of the French, the Portuguese anti-colonial movements of the 1970s, which overthrew Salazar. The victory of anti-imperial struggles also seemed to validate a certain progressive and optimistic theory of history. From the perspective of the present, those victories look less glorious and less optimistic, both in terms of the gains not achieved by many third world societies and from the perspective of my colleague Odd Arne Westad, who argues pretty powerfully that the Cold War was a continuation of colonialism.

I think that a left optimism of three decades ago or more also came from the tacit acceptance of a theory of history that would yield greater equality and greater redistribution of power. It was tacit, but still present, since most of us didn’t believe in real history trajectories as Marx and Hegel did. But we did seem to see good things happening: the 1950s were more prosperous than the 1930s; the generation of your father and mine fought against bad guys and won. But cf. now, Thomas Piketty compared to Marx: Piketty sees less grounds for believing in a trajectory of history that will push us forward. Indeed, his argument is that historical forces alone will not produce progressive changes.

And finally: I think that forty years ago, there was still a presumption that the redistributions that might occur would incorporate or buy in groups sliced along very different lines, I.e. that advances in equality, in the redistribution of power, would occur along class, gender, and racial lines, and international lines — that somehow the whole thing would move together. In contrast, the quandary or analytic problem we see now is that there have been remarkable advances in gender (not enough, but then again you are president of the APSA), also in race (not enough but we do have Obama), and extraordinarily so in terms of gender and sexual identity (as well as people with disabilities, etc.), but the class story has moved backwards. I think it’s this dispersion that has contributed to the variations in views. Being at heart an old fashioned Marxist, when I see the working class and the labor movement getting clobbered in one country after another, and now becoming nationalist rather than socialist in its politics, I feel glum.

1. **Anonymous:**

In terms of your theme, you might want to consider the book by Ta-Nehisi Coates. And certainly, many political scientists have echoed many of the same themes of Coates including in connection with mass incarceration. As we have discussed, many prominent political scientists have published in *Perspectives* on this general topic and theme.

However, we are also at a moment of the Bernie Sanders movement. His brand of progressivism certainly goes back to Eugene McCarthy, Henry Wallace, Eugene Debs, Robert La Follette and others. I was struck by the article in the *New York Times* about how many people from the Woodstock generation (I was actually at the festival.) finally see in Bernie a person with their goals and priorities. This kind of optimism and willingness to donate money and to volunteer has not been reflected necessarily in optimism by political scientists, even individuals on the political left. I suspect that many political scientists are skeptical of government and, having read everyone from Theodore Lowi to Mo Fiorina to Jeffrey Pressman, are concerned that government solutions –a la Bernie Sanders—would inevitably go awry. And the use of government policy to reinforce racial segregation and profiling in many communities around the country such as Chicago has reinforced these ideas.

Another point: the persistence of regime types undercut the arguments of many modernization advocates. Gosta Esping-Anderson’s work had an enormous influence when it was published in 1990. An implicit of message of the work is the extreme difficulty of changing regime type because of the persistence of institutional structures.

Your question also may be related to the gradual split between political science and public administration. John Gaus of the University of Wisconsin and then later Harvard, for example, used his APSA presidential address (1944) to state: “Our job” is to explain “the significance of physical, social, and intellectual change upon government as an instrument by means of which people may first may live at all, and live better.” Many in the discipline would no longer agree with Gaus that this is indeed “our job.” Many contemporary departments would not hire a person with this type of normative view on the good society and the role of government.

**17. Luis Fraga, University of Notre Dame**

1. In my view, academic progressive have always been much more confident critiquing than they have ever been developing constructive, engaged, viable, salient policy proposals to address the ills in society that many are so comfortable critiquing. On the whole, and especially as led by places like the Hoover Institution and the Heritage Foundation, "academic" conservatives have most often developed policy proposals that are explicitly designed to be put into effect immediately. Stated differently, progressives are more pessimistic because it is easier to be pessimistic than to hold oneself responsible for not making more realistic, applied policy proposals that flow from one's critique.

2. Academic conservatives have been much more closely aligned with fellow partisan elected and appointed government officials than have progressives. I say again that academics supported by places like Hoover and Heritage have long benefitted from these institutions' long standing decision to have explicit, mutually beneficial long-term relationships with influential, right-leaning government officials. The Center for American Progress and other groups are, in my view, much less accustomed to developing such relationships and, as a result, academic progressives are less known to them, and progressive ideas are not as directly linked to influencing the thinking of left-leaning government officials.

3. The result is that academic conservatives feel more empowered than do academic progressives. If my analysis above is correct, the reason is because academic conservatives ARE more empowered than are academic progressives. Academic conservatives are more directly linked to centers of decision making and power.

1. **Margaret Weir, Brown University**

Is it true that progressives are more pessimistic than in the past? First question is what past??

Stanley Greenberg’s new book, *America Ascendant* is mostly optimistic about the future of the US. Living in California, I shared a lot of this optimism – it felt like living in a future where the concerns of immigrants and of a waning middle class were important in politics; and the three strikes era was ending.

If progressives are more pessimistic:

--for Americanists, the “end of the New Deal era” has been a period of watching important social achievements atrophy (e.g. welfare reform, federal minimum wage decline). Also there is atrophy of key social forces supporting social equality – e.g. labor. So the whole era since the 1980s is one that seems to be of decline in fundamental institutions and ideas needed to support progressive change. This may be a reason they are more pessimistic than liberals were in earlier eras. Especially after Bill Clinton's presidency, it became clear that many key liberal hopes were not going to be fulfilled (a “Marshall Plan for the cities”; no "big government" etc.)

--the superior organizing capabilities of the right – money in politics – are very depressing; it is hard to figure out how to counter (this despite Obama’s two victories!);

--for Americanists focused on political economy, the dominance of the New Deal as a model for change makes it difficult to find hope in lesser changes that are much less sweeping and that may take longer for their impact to be felt. Reform feels like a finger in the dike.

--for scholars of race, the emergence of new forms of oppression (law and order) after the victories of civil rights creates a sense of futility. For scholars of immigration: 2 decades without reform and none in sight.

In fact I am feeling more pessimistic as I write this.

In terms of tools and orientations, one of the things that leads to pessimism is the influence of Foucault. In Foucault, there is no way out of the box. Even when you try to implement reforms, you end up supporting the system of oppression.

Another possibility is that political scientists in recent decades have narrowed their focus to concentrate on the federal government – but the more optimistic things for progressives are happening at the local level, where advocates for lower income people and for people of color have more power (and more recent successes);

Here is what I don’t understand about your email, however – why should we study this? Do you want to make the claim that a disposition (pessimism) is influencing the work of progressive academics in ways that are affecting what they study and how they study it? Does it serve as blinders to inquiry in particular ways? Are we failing to understand/note important phenomena because of pessimism?

**JLH**: Good question about why I want to analyze left pessimism, whatever it turns out to be. My initial answer is partly personal (how pessimistic should I be about politics in and the trajectory of the US?), partly growing out of my own genomics and race research, partly because it seems to me historically anomalous, partly because I think we need to accept the idea of studying our own views with the tools we use to study others (e.g. the social construction of "social construction").

That is too long a list, which suggests that I don't really have an answer to your question (yet?).

**Weir**: another rumination (that's why they call them ruminations, right?): I was thinking that a lot of progressives in recent years have focused on illuminating the features of neoliberalism, but at their worst, discussions of neoliberalism can be all-encompassing (like the Foucault approach) -- a tight interlocked system that is hard to break through. Focusing on neoliberalism, and especially focusing on it with such an approach, is likely to reinforce pessimism.

1. **Jacob Hacker, Yale University**

On left pessimism, you might look at the exchange between Noam Lupu, and Paul Pierson and me, at *Democracy* (a response to a review by Lupu of our book *American Amnesia*): http://democracyjournal.org/arguments/make-america-truly-great-again/. Lupu takes us to task for being excessively optimistic (and excessively idea-focused — two things we’re not usually accused of!). I do think that people read our last book as offering a soul-crushingly bleak view that we actually don’t share. In our more recent book, we are very explicit about reasons for optimism. Still, I would say that progressive academic concerns about “oligarchy" (Benjamin Page, Martin Gilens, Larry Jacobs, Jeffrey Winters, Larry Bartels) evidence a significant amount of left pessimism.

Why? I think it reflects two sources: (1) it’s always hard to think about reform — academics are much better at equilibrium analysis of the present (if economists predicted 9 of the last 3 recessions, political scientists have predicted virtually none of the major political upheavals of our era); (2) the hill is genuinely steep: we are in fact a long way from a well-functioning political system right now, and we face some big challenges, notably climate change (which I would include on your list). My own view is that the political scientists should actually be more optimistic than the economists who write about inequality, climate change, etc. are. Read William Nordhaus on climate change: the collective action problem means we’re making little or no progress (though Nordhaus has some smart ideas about how to tackle it). Or read Robert Gordon’s new book, *The Rise and Fall of American Growth*: His view is uber-pessimistic: demography, technology, and globalization all make slow growth and high inequality more or less inevitable. The political scientists who have shown that policy and politics matter have an effective counter to this despairing line of thinking — political and policy reform could give us a real opportunity to restore shared prosperity. FWIW, you can get a sense of where the academic right is by looking at the symposium *Commentary* did in November 2011 on “Optimistic or Pessimistic about America.” My read: The contributors preach the virtues of optimism but practice the vice of despondency…

On the last question, I would suggest that left pessimism probably follows a more cyclical pattern than you suggest. I remember reading a trenchant description of liberal despair around the time of the Truman presidency — maybe in Patterson’s *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974*? It reads like it could have been written after the 1994 or 2010 elections. Moreover, I’d probably think of this as a global phenomenon. If you want to see left pessimism today, go to London! There is a sense in Europe that the social democratic project has been shattered by the twin forces of populism and the economic calamity perpetuated, in large part, by European economic union (you can’t have a single currency without a central fiscal policy).

1. **Kristen Monroe, University of California at Irvine**

Most of my thoughts come not from American racial politics but rather from identity politics and how we view "the other", which of course does include race. (I hate the term. We're all members of the human race and the mere term seems an insult. Still, I know it is used.) Here I would look first to see if there are data or studies that provide statistical evidence that there indeed is more pessimism than before, more fear of strangers and "the other". Probably a good psychologist could help here [suggested names follow].

Ken Arrow says we have had these economic downturns before but never had someone like Trump. Is this true? I pointed out Father Coughlin and Huey Long. He countered that they were minor blips compared to Trump heading the major party. Ken's point was that he now felt democracy was under attack worldwide.

I would cast the net broadly--think about American politics generally, and specifically about democracy and about how we relate to each other. Do you find the left is more pessimistic on this now than before? Consider whether this possible pessimism is just merely getting swept up in the momentary hysteria. Didn't it feel pretty bad when your dad and others left Germany, as if the world were falling apart? Albert Hirschman told me the fall of France felt like the end of civilization, with the Nazis taking over. Is Trump worse than Hitler? I'd obviously say no -- but my point is that there have always been tough times. Are these times now tougher? Do people of good faith and vigilance have to always fight to protect democracy and the idea of progress?

So I'm pushing you to think more broadly, not just about the academic left/right but about the country as a whole. Are people thinking that the American century is ending, that we are now in decline? What about Reagan's counter to this kind of thinking over 40 years ago now?

I like asking what political science can contribute to this. Perhaps a sense of history is one thing, and maybe you can argue that we need longer historical information about how our own institutions were built but also that the institutions themselves have to be flexible.

1. **Michael Fortner, City University of New York**

Do you agree that the academic left is more pessimistic than liberals have traditionally been understood to be and/or more pessimistic than the academic right, whatever that is?

Yes, I believe the academic left is more pessimistic than liberals have traditional been understood and they are much more pessimistic than the academic right.  I think a lot of it has to do with shifting conceptions of human agency among conservatives and liberals.  Some of John Gray’s work speaks to this.  Classical conservatism believed in a natural order and an individual’s unchanging yet just position within that order.  The modern liberal view has been that individuals could define their own circumstances—even know (observe) and perhaps control nature.  The situation has almost been reversed in academia.  Conservatives tend to believe in progress, and liberals tend to believe individuals are caught within unchanging and unjust social orders.  And some liberals even doubt how much we can actually know about the world.

For example: In the political science of Edward Banfield, you can see the remnants of classical conservatism.  In 1970, he argued in *The Unheavenly City* that government programs can’t save poor people because of their culture. Today, the academic right tends to believe that well-constructed government programs can alleviate poverty.  That same year, Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was translated into English.  The text, like anti-colonial movements of the time, understood the forces of domination and exploitation but attempted to tap the agency of oppressed people and promote their liberation.  Today, (and this is based mostly on personal interactions), people who believe in this text tend to be very pessimistic about public education.  Now, contrast that pessimism with the optimism of conservative supporters of school choice.

Why, or why not?

I believe these developments are the result two different tends: 1) the rise (or invasion) of economic thinking and methods among the academic right; 2) The rise (or invasion) of structuralism and post-modernist criticism among leftist social scientists.   Economic thinking and methods tend to assume human agency and freedom, and structural and critical approaches tend to assume human domination.

I can’t explain my hypothesis about the developments on the right, but I have some thoughts about the developments on left, particularly as they relate to studies of race.  To counteract the economic determinism of neo-Marxists on the left and cultural arguments on the right, many students of race sought a structural approach that would clarify the systemic features of racial inequality.  Furthermore, critical theorists rightly interrogated the ways in which racial power informed the concepts and methods we employed to study racial inequality. But I think many on the academic left have become captives of this approach.  Whereas structuralism and critical theory were once used to identify counterfactuals to hegemony, today many counterfactuals (e.g. instances of progress) are now considered manifestations of oppression.  There is no change: only stability. Instead of living in society of disperse inequalities, we are now subjects of the new Jim Crow and other similar racial analogies.

Why? Sometimes I think, it’s personal. I wonder why very successful African Americans like Ta Nehisi Coates, who have been embraced and supported by the very white power structure they condemn, carry such a dark view of American society.  Maybe your *Facing Up to the American Dream* is useful here:  maybe the pessimism of successful blacks is a product of their interaction with the white power structure.  Cornel West’s *Race Matters* is far more optimistic than his current thinking. Perhaps that meeting with Larry Summers was decisive.  With that said, this pessimism also affects white scholars.

This suggests to me that the justifiable attention to economic and racial inequality within the social sciences has had ideological implications that has in turn shaped how we study economic and racial equality. Perhaps feedback effects?  This ideology—if it’s even that—shapes the questions we pose and the data we gather.  It effects our interpretation of “facts."

For example:  In a book panel, the book’s author quoted a *New York Times* poll that shows two key things: African Americans in New York used to be more concerned about crime than civil rights, and African Americans did not express much support for radical black organizations, like the Nation of Islam.  But the author did not express much support for the poll, which was strange (he used the poll in the book).  He apparently trusts polls that paint whites as racists but was suspicious of all polls that reveal conservative black attitudes.  On one level, I agree.  The poll’s methodology could have biased the result of the poll. But my perspective, which I learned from one of my professors, is that all data—good and bad—can tell us something. We just need to interrogate the systematic origins of the data.  My view is that good social science can solve methodological problems rightly identified by critical approaches.  But this isn’t shared by others on the left who easily dismiss evidence that doesn’t confirm their views.  (BTW: The *New York Times* published the poll’s methodology, and the data collection process does not undermine the inferences the author drew from the survey).

 Are there analytic frames or concepts or tools that political scientists can use to study or provide insight into this phenomenon?

I don’t have an answer for this question.   Borrowing again from *Facing Up to the American Dream*, I think the only solution for the pessimism and optimism is for scholars on the left and right to believe in the ideology of the scientific method.  Everyone involved in the exercise needs to believe that social science methods—informed and rightfully altered by critical theories and intellectual movements like Perestroika—can increase our knowledge of the social and political world.  Moreover, we must believe that the solution for inferences that offend our political sensibilities is better, more transparent research. We must acknowledge the conceptual integrity of counterfactuals.

1. **Katherine Levine Einstein, Boston University**

One immediate question that comes to mind is: what, exactly, are academics pessimistic about, since progress and change encompass such broad areas? So, it might be helpful to identify the specific areas where (liberal) academics are seemingly especially pessimistic. For example, there have been a lot of think pieces recently (e.g. [http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/05/30/the-new-activism-of-liberal-arts-colleges](https://urldefense.proofpoint.com/v2/url?u=http-3A__www.newyorker.com_magazine_2016_05_30_the-2Dnew-2Dactivism-2Dof-2Dliberal-2Darts-2Dcolleges&d=CwMFaQ&c=WO-RGvefibhHBZq3fL85hQ&r=Elc8rXwqsbqCIO9FfGFy2N5OydC2FeDmRtS6fkV8bPs&m=NbAUaRWGSqxZxIbHtyvinlWKfd834j6sDORvo6x_se4&s=-r4UPKbaQ9LlLMmrdCC05G086NDBVjzSnprIwoy9U6k&e=)) about whether liberal arts colleges are limiting free and full academic discussions. And, as you point out, there seems to be a lot of scholarly pessimism about our ability to successfully incorporate minority groups, particularly in the face of Donald Trump's capacity to so successfully capitalize on anger (Antoine Banks' work on the links between anger and racial resentment seems especially relevant: [http://www.cambridge.org/us/academic/subjects/sociology/political-sociology/anger-and-racial-politics-emotional-foundation-racial-attitudes-america](https://urldefense.proofpoint.com/v2/url?u=http-3A__www.cambridge.org_us_academic_subjects_sociology_political-2Dsociology_anger-2Dand-2Dracial-2Dpolitics-2Demotional-2Dfoundation-2Dracial-2Dattitudes-2Damerica&d=CwMFaQ&c=WO-RGvefibhHBZq3fL85hQ&r=Elc8rXwqsbqCIO9FfGFy2N5OydC2FeDmRtS6fkV8bPs&m=NbAUaRWGSqxZxIbHtyvinlWKfd834j6sDORvo6x_se4&s=tEQWIcX-HNqd_aZk6SySnBv-JrShID5IGH1GSm4ItmY&e=)).

The second question I had was how we would measure whether pessimism is especially high at this particular moment in time (or significantly higher for liberal academics relative to conservatives). I could imagine optimism/pessimism being cyclical---for example, liberal academics might have felt heartened by the robust student protest movements in support of civil rights (and in opposition to the Vietnam War), only to be disappointed by students' acceptance of the country's increasing turn to the right under Reagan.

We obviously don't have public opinion data measuring academic happiness/unhappiness (and those kinds of survey questions are notoriously unreliable anyway). But could we, say, do a content analysis of scholarly articles to see whether an increasing number of them have depressing discussion sections about their findings' "disturbing implications?" Are scholarly articles increasingly oriented towards finding problems with the way society operates rather than identifying solutions to these societal ills?  Maybe there's a way to at least code abstracts.

I wonder if *PS*, which allows for a bit more academic editorializing, would be a good place to find some evidence of rising pessimism, too. One other place that might at least allow for partisan comparisons (though not longitudinal ones) would be to code Monkey Cage posts.

And, finally, do you think that these trends are necessarily limited to academics? What about academics makes us especially likely to feel pessimistic about these general societal trends?

1. **Traci Burch, Northwestern University**

My immediate reaction to your initial idea about left pessimism is that I’m not sure it’s just the left. It seems like EVERYONE is dismayed at the state of the world (and politics) today. I can’t imagine that conservative academics think that they are ‘winning’ any academic or policy debates right now. I fear if you dig into just the left, people will give you plenty of examples of pessimism on the right. And maybe, why pessimism and not realism?

In my own thinking, I’m all over the map. Some days I think we are really seeing the end of days, and others I am just so proud that people are finally standing up and demanding action on equality issues. Backlash against ‘progress’ seems global and frightening. It’s hard to see those Trump rallies as the last gasp of racial conservatives. And Brexit! Sometimes I think the only way I can be optimistic is to see economic and social inequality as hitting rock bottom—things just have to get better.

Maybe a more positive (at least forward looking) address would talk about how our preconceived notions need to go out the window. Pessimism perhaps made us miss real change on issues like sexuality and gender and race (especially in the past ten years or so). But I think that’s just part of a lack of recognition in the discipline that this is not 1995 anymore (the return of the Clintons aside). A lot of rules and alliances have changed and our methods and theories haven’t. (As an aside, globally, is it more like 1930?)

I always liked the idea that we wrote about in our book that progress is not simple andstraightforward. There are lots of indicators—things going in the right direction, and some going the opposite. Progress is fragile and contingent and certainly not inevitable. And sometimes comes with its own downsides (and losers). Is it pessimistic to acknowledge that there might be some losers and to worry that the losers will be those who have always been left out?

1. **GARY GERSTLE, University of Cambridge**

1989. I have not written anything on the subject, and nor is there a ready-made literature on it. My own ruminations are based on living through the aftermath of communism's collapse, and drawing on many years of studying social movements in the US and elsewhere. Many of those movements drew on utopian visions whose proper starting point were the Atlantic Revolutions of the late eighteenth century, visions then refueled by the socialist and communist imaginings and revolutions of the 20th century. All shared a belief in worlds transformed by revolution, and the implementation of regimes of liberty and equality for all. I don't think that same belief has animated liberals and leftists since 1989, at least not with the same intensity. Social democracy is more reformist and technocratic than transformative in its aims. Some of the ebbing of transformative ardor is good; a lot of revolutions turned out badly. But something has been lost too.

I don't think that we've done enough reckoning with 1989. Theodore Draper called the 20th century the Communist century--this was before the Soviet Union fell. And he's right. What he meant was that communism was the 20th century's most important idea, a word and program that circulated throughout the world, inspiring passionate support and opposition everywhere. It was an idea with which virtually every society had to reckon. Fascism must be understood in part as a response to the threat of communism. That the whole set of beliefs collapsed so suddenly and so completely cannot but have had a major effect on global politics and economics. Our globalization moment was made possible by the collapse, opening half the world to trade and neoliberalism in ways it had not been for decades. And many other things were made possible as well, including, I believe, a resurgence of religion. Portions of the Middle East where radical Islam is strong are regions that once bought deeply into the socialist dream--via the Baathists in Iraq and Syria and Nasserism in Egypt, for example--and came away deeply disillusioned. We have not reckoned sufficiently with this, in part because most people had concluded by 1989 that communist philosophies were not workable. True, they're not. But that doesn't mean that the exit from a world animated by left utopian dreams of social transformation would be painless or without effect. Michael Walzer would be very interesting on these matters and worth consulting.

1. **John Mollenkopf, CUNY Graduate Center**

“Do you agree that the academic left is more pessimistic than liberals have traditionally been understood to be and/or more pessimistic than the academic right, whatever that is?”

The academic left has been enthused by Thomas Piketty’s and Anthony Atkinson’s critiques of inequality and the growing contrast between the 1% vs 99% has raised the intellectual salience of inequality, with Bernie Sanders’ giving it political weight. However, this debate has not produced much political movement on concrete, workable policy measures we need, nor have debates about how best to diminish inequality in the U.S. produced a clear path. Campaigns for workers' rights or raising the minimum wage are certainly important, but will not change the structural bases of inequality. Also, the persistence and magnitude of black anger in the wake of the police killings of the last few years and Black Lives Matter leaves the (white) left at a position of disadvantage. Lastly, not many on the academic left got excited about Hillary Clinton as their standard bearer. The academic (and political) right revels in the chance to say (a la Paul Ryan the other night) that academic left solutions have either not reduced the problem or made it worse. Creeping neoliberalism of the center left (Clinton, Blair, Obama in certain respects) cuts the ground out from under full-throated government interventions. So yes I agree, the academic left is pessimistic.

“Why, or why not?”

The social basis of our current political malaise is that the earnings of the middle of the income distribution have stagnated or declined as the top took a bigger share and the bottom third lost ground. Layer the increasingly precarious nature of work and family life on top of that, along with the difficulty that New Deal- and Great Society-era social supports have in helping people cope with precarious work/family lives, and you get a crisis in our welfare state, however partial it is. (Certainly income supports and childcare and family supports help and should be expanded.) There is a dearth of politically viable ideas on the left about how to cope with these new conditions (or actually not-so-new, given that the “great U-turn” started in the early or mid-1970s).

“Are there analytic frames or concepts or tools that political scientists [and historians] can use to study or provide insight into this phenomenon?”

La Follette progressivism, along with social democratic thinking in England and Europe, arose in response to the displacements of the rise of mass production capitalism from the end of the 19th into the 20th century. We’ve undergone a similarly pervasive economic transition (globalization, transnationalization, problematizing old borders of various kinds, burden shifting onto the individual) over the last 50 years, but our intellectuals haven’t done an equally good job of producing reforms tailored to the new situation. Why? We’ve got tons of think tanks and left-leaning academics, so we do not lack for talent, but it is disorganized. Marxist thinking is pretty isolated. The anti-war, pro-civil rights new left of the baby boom has fractured into myriad specific campaigns. Post-structural or postmodern thinking is dysfunctional in many ways to building a left political consensus.

“further thoughts…”

Think about what has happened to the leading new left or neo-Marxist thinkers from the 1970s who were my intellectual milieu at Harvard and the Bay Area. These brilliant people are all now doing highly valuable intellectual projects, but to me they do not add up to the kind of movement we aspired forty years ago to create that would radically push the boundaries of social democracy. Some might not even say they are leftists or radicals. I say this with admiration and affection, not as a criticism, in recognition of things as they are.

And me? My way of pushing those boundaries is to work on the intellectual and political challenges of constructing progressive urban political coalitions that can push through substantive measures to improve city life, expand upward mobility, and empower under-represented groups, for example by promoting immigrant political mobilization. In my view, a successful left intellectual movement must have various links with successful grass roots movements. We are at a dark moment in the history of progressive or left activism in the U.S. and we have to rekindle the light for it

1. **Alvin Tillery, Northwestern University**

Your queries about “Left pessimism” with regard to racial progress and breakthroughs in genomics touch on the borders of some of the work in political theory that I have been doing lately. Building on the critical race theory movement in legal academia and the republican tradition in black political thought, I have been trying to develop an ethics for both transracial and post-racial identities. What is really clear from engagement with both of these left traditions is that they turn to pessimism in moments where the state abrogates its responsibility to enforce the rule of law due to institutional inertia or is captured by conservative forces. Derrick Bell’s theory of “racial realism,” for example, is a response to the retrenchment in the civil rights state under the Reagan era. Throughout the writing in which he develops his theory, he consistently references his days as an optimist about race relations and also provides a path forward for a return to optimism: elections, the growth of an antiracial elite, etc.

In short, I do not think that left pessimism is a static mode of analysis; it is a cyclical response to real periods of retrenchment. In the field of race relations, we have lived through such a period of retrenchment over the last two decades—e.g., *Parents Involved* (2007); *Shelby* (2013). Moreover, while some indicators of class standing for African Americans have improved, the racial gap in incomes has remained the same since the 1970s. Finally, the spate of police shootings of unarmed African Americans (captured on video) are tangible markers that our progress has stalled on these issues. If one truly believes in full equality, it is hard to not be pessimistic about these downturns. Like Bell, I believe that this pessimism is important for building social movements that might overcome these problems. At the same time, I believe that the failure to recognize social progress—to see us as essentially frozen in time—as some critical theorists do is a big mistake.

On the genomics question, I think that there is some justifiable pushback against the view that demonstrating that something is or is not rooted in our genes should prescribe social organization. Take, for example, the eliminativist argument about racial identities. While it is true that the scientific race concept is a fiction, knowing this has not made us as a society any better at dealing with the inequalities that exist based on the maldistributions that have occurred in the name of race. For the persons on the wrong side of these distributions, it provides little comfort to know that the root cause of their condition is a fiction.

Here I am reminded of W.E.B. Du Bois’s brilliant descriptions in both *Souls of Black Folk* and *Darkwater* of how he came to realize that he was African American through a microaggression—the refusal of his greeting card—by a white classmate. Similarly, when I was nine years old, I survived a lynching (literally) at the hands of older boys in the neighborhood that my family integrated. Moving from a working class black neighborhood in Philadelphia, I had no idea that I was vulnerable to such an attack or even that I even belonged to a “race” at that point in my life. I doubt that my lack of racial consciousness would have mattered at all to my attackers had they been aware of that fact. These narratives point to one of the fundamental flaws with eliminativism based on genomics—it requires a collective commitment to allow scientific realities to alter irrational commitments that we made long ago. This is an incredibly difficult ask for anyone—liberal or conservative—in our political culture.

1. **Dan Carpenter, Harvard University**

I agree that on a range of issues, left academics are in fact more pessimistic.    
  
[To your set of foci,] I might add trade policy and even economic growth more generally.  The souring of many intellectuals for growth-driven improvements in well-being that are "Pareto-improving" (lifting all boats at least somewhat) has been going on for a while, and not without good reason.  The *New York Times* a few weeks ago ran a story that expressed surprise that so many were expressing such deep skepticism about neo-liberal policies, everything from trade agreements to opposing rent control.    
  
But I would have to think that on a range of other issues -- say rights attached to sexuality in the U.S., secularism, and perhaps drug legislation for things like marijuana -- the left might in fact have become more optimistic, not less.  
  
The other caveat I would offer for the moment is that many conservatives -- depending on your definition of what that includes -- are most certainly not optimistic about things such as economic development, the future of the American family, etc.

1. **Kim Williams, Portland State University**

In general, speaking about the U.S., I think the disarray on the political right gives liberals hope. On racial politics, it’s hard to convince people that racism still exists when post-racial/colorblind ideology tells them otherwise (think 2008). By contrast, just yesterday, here in predominantly white Portland, I came across a group of 20-25 young white people marching with “Black Lives Matter” signs. I looked around, and as far as I could tell, I was the only black person in the vicinity. They gave me a flyer that detailed many of the recent murders at the hands of the cops. If I'd been willing, they would have kept me there all day talking about police brutality and how tough it is for black people! Like I don't already know!

In any case, the point is that these white kids were trying, in the main, to tell other white people that we have a problem with racism. It crossed my mind that these same kids could have been chanting “race doesn’t matter” along with the other white liberals in Charleston during the Obama campaign. Trump’s ascendance (coupled with ongoing police brutality now captured on smartphones), is showing white liberals that old fashioned racism is still here. Bottom line: I think (and hope) that Trump’s campaign is helping some white people begin to see racial disparities that were there all along.

On a related note, in a lecture on women’s history, when I got to second wave feminism, I talked about Phyllis Schlafly’s doomsday scenario about what would happen if the Equal Rights Amendment [ERA] passed: same-sex marriage, unisex public bathrooms, women subject to the draft, expanded access to abortion, etc. On most of these fronts, even absent the ERA, the liberal left is winning. Combine that with the overall decline in religiosity in the U.S., increasing interracial marriage/dating, the increase in all kinds of non-traditional family arrangements, etc., and the right is on the ropes. Where are the family values people now? They’re nowhere near the force they were, say, 20-25 years ago.

After a crazy primary season, there is reason to think that liberals can come together (e.g., Bernie endorsing Hillary today). By contrast, the coming months (and arguably years) will surely spell more problems for conservatives. While conservatives usually denounce race baiting publicly, over the years, they have nonetheless primed their base to view their interests in racial terms. With the GOP electorate at, what, 90% white? the GOP postmortem on the 2012 election seems prescient. But on race relations, trade policy, trickle-down economics, etc. the GOP base is having none of it! In a nutshell, I think the GOP crisis emboldens liberals. Looking forward, these changes will play out over a number of election cycles. The right (academic and otherwise) has more reason for pessimism than the left.

1. **Noah Pickus, Duke University**

If there is such a thing as “left pessimism” where might it come from? Well, lots of candidates — some might say, well, from the facts! Or from our deep and careful understanding of history and politics. Maybe. But I’d also include prominently in the list the echo chamber within the academy. The “I don’t know anyone who would vote for Trump so he couldn’t be elected”. Or, per Jonathan Haidt, the deep bias he’s found within the academic psychology community (with implications for political science) and the ways in which two values trump (hah – pun!) all others in his model. My point is simple: how could we possibly know IF the left is right to be pessimistic if we’re inspecting our own house?

1. **Jeffrey Isaac, Indiana University**

I am not sure that I agree with your central theme about “left pessimism,” and I think there may even be ambivalence in your own question. Are you challenging “the left” because it is closer to you than “the right?” On “left pessimism” I do offer two suggestions:

1) you need to sharpen your definition of “left,” which currently seems to capture a wide range of perspectives in the academy and discipline, most of which are less conventionally “left” than they are liberal or multiculturalist or post-modern. Indeed, I think on the conventional “left” a case could be made that there is excessive optimism. Certainly the Marxist left has been very optimistic about class struggles in Europe, and there is even interest in a revived “neocommunism.” Of course, on “the right” there is a consensus about the “left.” You might find Jonathan Shields and Joshua Dunn’s *Passing on the Right: Conservative Professors in the Progressive University* a useful foil.

2) You need to “establish” that the world is a better place. In many ways the macro-statistics might bear out the optimistic scenario (see Stephen Pinker, also the work of Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel, and others on “modernization” and “freedom rising,” etc.). But there are also some counter-tendencies that might give more credence to the “pessimism:” 1) global warming (major, and something our discipline does not pay enough attention to!), 2) the formation of a “precariat” that affects especially the younger generation, 3) the persistence of real threats (e.g., terrorism) but also the magnification of these threats by the media, and 4) a sense of vulnerability and insecurity that might in fact be caused by the pace of life, the constant circulation of images, etc.

3) With regard to your father’s generation, it reminded me of this quote from Albert Camus’s 1957 Nobel Prize speech (there is an even better quote in Camus’s Columbia University speech “The Human Crisis,” but I can’t find it right now):

“For more than twenty years of an insane history, hopelessly lost like all the men of my generation in the convulsions of time, I have been supported by one thing: by the hidden feeling that to write today was an honour because this activity was a commitment - and a commitment not only to write. Specifically, in view of my powers and my state of being, it was a commitment to bear, together with all those who were living through the same history, the misery and the hope we shared. These men, who were born at the beginning of the First World War, who were twenty when Hitler came to power and the first revolutionary trials were beginning, who were then confronted as a completion of their education with the Spanish Civil War, the Second World War, the world of concentration camps, a Europe of torture and prisons - these men must today rear their sons and create their works in a world threatened by nuclear destruction. Nobody, I think, can ask them to be optimists. And I even think that we should understand - without ceasing to fight it - the error of those who in an excess of despair have asserted their right to dishonour and have rushed into the nihilism of the era. But the fact remains that most of us, in my country and in Europe, have refused this nihilism and have engaged upon a quest for legitimacy. They have had to forge for themselves an art of living in times of catastrophe in order to be born a second time and to fight openly against the instinct of death at work in our history.

Each generation doubtless feels called upon to reform the world. Mine knows that it will not reform it, but its task is perhaps even greater. It consists in preventing the world from destroying itself.”

1. **John Ishiyama, University of North Texas**

I think that the greatest effect we have as political science is via teaching our students, to be lifelong learners, critical thinkers, and actively engaged citizens in a democracy.

I have long thought that revitalizing both civic engagement and civic education is a national imperative. Several colleagues in Political Science Education have already taken up the promoting civic engagement at a programmatic level. Elizabeth Bennion, Alison Millet-McCartney and Dick Simpson, produced the APSA’s *Teaching Civic Engagement: From Student to Active Citizen*. http://community.apsanet.org/teachingcivicengagement/home

Related to this is a fabulous initiative conducted by Cherie Strachan and Elizabeth Bennion, a consortium of universities and colleges that are coordinating studies of civic engagement and sharing data and information on practices.

http://www.politicalsciencenow.com/the-national-survey-of-student-learners-and-the-consortium-for-inter-campus-sotl-research/

Another key way to help develop human capital is to promote undergraduate student research in political science. We have at University of North Texas the only NSF-REU program that funds undergraduate research in comparative politics and international relations with a focus on Conflict Management and Peace Science (the study of civil wars and how to prevent them and build peace). The program just completed its seventh year. Promoting undergraduate research helps build critical thinkers and human capital. We also target underrepresented groups in higher education and first-generation college and low income students. Here is a link to the program: https://untconflictmgmtreu.wordpress.com/

Finally, there is an area where we can do much much more-- Civic Education (which is not the same as civic engagement). This has always been a core part of what APSA has done since the association's inception (see our article for the centennial issue of the *APSR* that focuses on the APSA and undergraduate education). I think we have either abandoned, or been supplanted by others, in, this role. For example, I am not sure of many public school systems that require civics education (it has been subsumed under general social science requirements). Although in Texas, there are required courses in government at the undergraduate level, this is not true in many (if not the majority) of states (certainly was not required in Missouri). To me this is tragic and in part explains the current situation of low knowledge about the system and low levels of engagement. I think we as an association need to push back and fight to have civics education restored as a core part of secondary and post-secondary education.

1. **Kerstin Hamann, University of Central Florida**.

In Florida, middle school students are required to take Civics (currently in 7th grade). Given that only a portion of students ever make it to college, I think that working with the K-12 school system is hugely important. My department houses the Lou Frey Institute of Politics and Government, a non-partisan institute that has as the core of its mission the development of engaged citizens. Among its multiple initiatives is the Partnership for Civic Learning [http://loufreyinstitute.org/pcl], development of materials for K-12 students and teachers for civics education (especially 7th grade), and so on.

**32. Maureen Feeley, University of California, San Diego**

I’ve been thinking a lot about this question in response to the growing sense of political apathy and alienation I see not only in my students, but also in broader social networks (middle school, high school, kids' soccer, neighborhood, etc.).

We can have our greatest impact in countering current pervasive pessimism in three main areas:

First, *undergraduate teaching/research-based learning*. [We need] active learning courses that incorporate the development of skills that we know are necessary for active citizenship. They are research/information literacy; critical thinking, speaking, and writing, in addition to independent undergraduate research opportunities.

We need to do more to support undergraduate research in our classrooms (and beyond) to further develop critical thinking, speaking and writing skills. For a terrific/classic resource on this, see: The Boyer Commission, *Educating Undergraduates in the Research University: “Reinventing Undergraduate Education: A Blueprint for America’s Research Universities”* [<http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED424840>]. Ideas here range from creating more programs like the one at University of North Texas to “making research-based learning the standard” (Boyer Report) in our classrooms. And I completely agree re: the importance of reaching out to underrepresented groups, especially first generation and low income.

In our classrooms, one of many examples includes creating opportunities for students to write policy papers focused on a policy problem of their choice related to course content. This brings students into the political process on a policy problem of interest to them; builds their research literacy and writing skills appropriate to a policy brief format; helps them identify relevant advocacy groups (for whom they might intern or work one day); and supports them in learning how to leverage the appropriate actors and institutions to promote change. Beyond the classroom, for example, the UC San Diego Political Science department has implemented a “research apprenticeship program,” which is open to all majors of upper-division standing. Undergraduates are mentored by faculty and/or graduate students over two quarters, and they write a 20-page research paper, jointly authored by faculty and/or grad students.

Second, *undergraduate internships*: creating and supporting (integrating into our curricula) opportunities for internships at local, state, national, and even international levels. There’s a large and growing literature that investigates the impact of undergraduate internships on political knowledge and engagement, with robust positive results. (Elizabeth Bennion and Renee van Vechten, among others, have done work in this area.) At UCSD, we’ve implemented a two-quarter local internship program where students can intern in local congressional and state legislative field offices, as well as in local govt offices, and with NGOs/INGOs with local offices (e.g. International Rescue Committee, United Nations Association–San Diego). Students write a research paper based on their internship, mentored by a faculty member, during spring quarter.

Our undergraduates also have access to state and national internships, for which they can earn academic credit through the UC-Sacramento program [http://uccs.ucdavis.edu/] and the UC-Washington DC program (UC-DC) [https://www.ucdc.edu/internships].

Third, *secondary school outreach*: providing leadership and mentoring for secondary school outreach in civic education and engagement. We need to play a more active role in providing leadership and support for civics education and engagement outreach, especially at the secondary school level. I think there are many great examples out there to learn from, such as a program that Elizabeth Matto has implemented at the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers. (A brief summary was published in the summer 2014 Political Science Education newsletter, “The Educator.”) The program is called “RU Ready” and is designed to provide local high school students with the knowledge and skills needed to be politically engaged/active citizens. The program involves a team of Rutgers undergraduate students who, under Matto’s supervision, facilitate a series of workshops with local high school students to earn either three internship credits from the Rutgers Political Science Department, or a 1.5 credit topics course offered as part of a student learning community.

**33. Renee van Vechten, University of Redlands**

I want to reiterate the importance of internships and add practical interaction with policymakers. Developing solid relationships between academic departments (or institutions) and local, state, and national leaders can lead to guest lectures in class, campus talks, events, internships, etc. -- and as we already know, the more "human" politics seems, the less abstractly impersonal or oppositional it becomes. Active, policy-oriented courses built around solving or addressing a community-based issue can also advance students' sense of civic investment.

**34. Anonymous**

Many members of our profession may be pessimistic in their scholarship but nonetheless work for positive change on the campuses, through the association, their local communities, etc. Somewhat relatedly, many faculty on the left have supported faculty and grad student unionization, local organizing, the Boycott Divestment and Sanctions movement, and many other forms of political activism, even as their research itself is quite pessimistic about the possibilities of human agency. Is the answer the Scholars Strategy Network and related types of initiatives that promote scholars interested in social and policy change?