

Pessimism, Optimism and Patriotism

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London never graduated from Oakland High School, but as a student there in 1895 he wrote stories and essays for the school's literary magazine, the *Aegis*, an experience that gave him his first real audience and enabled him to serve an apprenticeship as a writer. In several short stories he created a character he called the "Frisco Kid"—a kind of latter-day Huck Finn. He brought "The Kid" back to life in *The Cruise of the Dazzler* (1902). Written for boys, his parable about a rich boy and a poor boy depicts an idyllic boyhood world in which class and class conflict don't matter.

In "Pessimism, Optimism and Patriotism" (1895) London strives to emulate the nineteenth-century essayists he admired, particularly Ralph Waldo Emerson and John Ruskin, both of whom he mentions in the text. London walks a middle ground, trying to avoid the extremes of the pessimists (the radicals) and the optimists (the conservatives). Gradually, he reveals his sympathies by defining the optimists as the "prosperous middle and autocratic classes" and the pessimists as the "anarchists, socialists and labor leaders, with the great masses which they represent." By the end, his essay has become a political manifesto condemning the inhumane working conditions that give rise to "social and moral degradation." The title hints at London's own extreme mood swings, from pessimism to optimism, and his deep-seated American patriotism. •

Three isms—but what a wealth of significance they contain, when considered relatively. Both pessimism and optimism, though diametrically opposed, embrace many followers, who, though they view the affairs of this world through different colored glasses, are working for a common cause, which, in its highest sense, is called patriotism. But does the common cause benefit by the patriotic endeavors of these two classes? Nay, they do it the greatest harm. And why? For the simple reason that the followers of optimism should be pessimists, and the followers of pessimism should be optimists. As it is, the inconsistency of their relative positions is so startlingly apparent, that it would quite nonplus Emerson, himself, if he tried to reconcile it with his almost divine law of "Compensation."

Every nation, in the written or unwritten history of the world, that has risen, declined and fallen through internal causes, fell through the antagonism of these two classes, in which pessimism always ultimately triumphed. And so, if one can read the "signs of the times" aright, in the dim future, like calamities await us through like causes. If the adherents of these two principles were to change places, or if we could

wipe out, "root and branch," every optimist in the land, and become a race of pessimists, then could we prove the shadow lengthening across the American landscape to be a phantom, nothing more.

Already, I can hear the reader asking, "Who are our optimists, who should be rooted out; swept from the face of the earth; annihilated?" And I answer, They are our sleepers. They know, yet know not that they know. They are the great gray matter of our nation; those who should mould and control our progress, and not leave it to dash wildly on with its own ungovernable force. Our prosperous middle and autocratic higher classes are optimists; as are our university and collegiate bred men, who have received the "fruits of higher education." They are all, or nearly all, satisfied with the existing state of affairs. They believe that everything is for the best, and when an occasional rumble is heard, think it but a misplaced boulder, crushed beneath the Wheels of Progress.

This class reminds one of the Pompeians, who knew that in the days before Vesuvius had risen in his might on destruction bent; yet they paused not to reflect, when from far beneath, the rumbles and groans of complaining earth came to the ear.

Again, I hear the reader ask, "Who are our pessimists?" And I answer, They are the pulsing life-cells of our nation, its flesh and bones and sinews. They are those who know not, and know not that they know not. They contend and find fault (and rightly so) with existing conditions. They are our pessimists, who, if they had the brains of our optimists, would sustain, renovate and advance with healthy stimulus, the prosperity of the nation. As it is, though their motives are right, their results are decidedly wrong. While wishing to recreate, they ignorantly destroy. Our anarchists, socialists and labor leaders with the great masses which they represent, are the components of that great tidal wave of humanity, which a few of our talented observers have already taken notice of and classified as the "Coming Terror."

In the second issue of the Aegis, a pessimist asserts that "we are on the verge of destruction and anarchism." In the third, he is laughed at by an optimist, who alleges that "we are approaching the goal of universal enlightenment." And both cry, "Universal education." The pessimist says we need it; the optimist says we have it; and I say whether we have it or not, we need something more.

It has been truly said that a "little education is a dangerous thing." We cry, "Educate the masses!" and at the same time overlook the fact that the powers "that be" prevent these very masses from gaining more than a little education. Long hours, sweating systems and steadily decreasing wages are conducive to naught but social and moral degradation. As Ruskin says, "We have now a low and lower class, and who, if there is a next world, are damned; and if there is none, they are damned already."

Can we expect to attain the “goal of universal enlightenment” while the nation labors under such conditions?

You gray matter! You optimists! You cry, “Universal Education!” Then settle down and wait for the mountain to come to Mohammed. We need universal education; but we also need a first cause, which would be supplied, if our optimists would become pessimists, and with their superior intellectual abilities, break the path for the masses to tread.

Arise, ye Americans, patriots and optimists! Awake! Seize the reins of a corrupted government and educate your masses!

What Socialism Is

First published in and reprinted from the *San Francisco Examiner*, December 25, 1895.

In “What Socialism Is” London tackled the volatile subject of revolution, which was making headlines around the world. He might have written for a socialist publication, but he wanted to reach middle-class readers—not just radicals like himself—and the *San Francisco Examiner*, the leading Bay Area newspaper, suited his aims. Written poetically, and with passion, the essay illustrates London’s distinctive style. Here, for the first time, he put the “stamp of self,” as he called it, on the subject of social and political upheaval, depicting revolution as a storm brewing on the horizon. Oakland and San Francisco had their share of young radical writers, but few, if any, had London’s élan, mystique, and gumption. At a time when most Americans regarded socialism—an alien worldview imported by immigrants—with deep suspicion, London managed to make it seem patriotic to be a socialist.

London did not directly quote Marx’s *The Communist Manifesto*, available in English since 1888 and distributed widely in the United States, or refer to Marx explicitly, but Marx’s influence is apparent. Borrowing Marx’s metaphor of Communism as a “specter” haunting Europe, London described it as a specter haunting the Bay Area. He seems to have wanted, in part, to shock his readers with the idea of socialism haunting them on Christmas, when his article appeared in print. As a Dickensian Ghost of Christmas Present, London haunted would-be Bay Area Scrooges: “How incongruous this specter, stalking forth when all is joy and merry-making.” He urged his readers to “give the reins of your imagination to your curiosity” and to “picture this dreadful monster with all the terrorism your fear may suggest”

On the same day, the *Examiner* ran a colorful profile of London as the “Boy Socialist!”