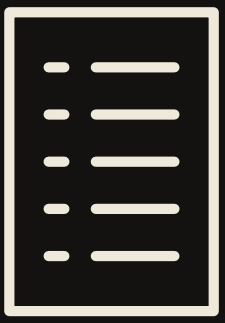
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AGAINST THE BRIGHT FUTURE: TWELVE THESES ON OPTIMISM

Ottoline Brack

APOCALYPSE CULT

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I

Optimism is not a feeling. It is an instruction. Observe who issues it and to whom. It travels in one direction only, from those who are comfortable to those who are not, and it means: wait.

II

They say the future will be better, and they say it in the tone used for announcing a train. But a train has a timetable, and one may complain when it does not arrive. Ask an optimist for the timetable. You will be told that you are being negative.

III

The future was the last thing they sold us, and like everything else from that shop it arrived broken, with instructions nobody at the factory could read.

I say sold advisedly. We paid for it. We paid in the present, which is the only currency anyone has, and we were given in exchange a description of goods to be delivered later. That the goods have not come is thought to be no reason to stop paying.

IV

There is a second kind of optimist, who believes that everything must first fall down. He looks forward to the collapse as other men look forward to a holiday. After the ruin, he says, we shall build properly.

I have noticed that he does not live in the building. He has made arrangements. The people who wish most fervently for the clean sweep are those with somewhere to stand while it is swept. For everyone else, a collapse is merely the same life with the roof off.

V

I am told that pessimism is a luxury. It is the reverse. Hope is the luxury: it requires a surplus, a little spare capacity with which to imagine otherwise. Those who have nothing to spare are not pessimists. They are simply accurate.

VI

Consider the phrase "in the long run." It is used to end conversations. Whatever is wrong today will, in the long run, have been a necessary stage. I should like to meet the person who has lived in the long run. Everyone I know has been obliged to live on a Tuesday.

VII

Progress is real. I do not deny it; I have had teeth out under anaesthetic. What I deny is that it is a direction. It is a list. Some things have got better, at particular times, because particular people insisted.

Nothing in the list was inevitable, and nothing on it will stay there unattended.

To call the list a direction is to suggest that it will go on lengthening by itself. That suggestion has cost us more than any quantity of despair.

VIII

The cheerful are not kinder than the gloomy. Go to a cheerful man with a trouble and he will tell you it is not so bad, because he would prefer it not to be. Go to a gloomy one and he will pull out a chair. He was expecting you.

IX

It is said in defence of optimism that it gets things done. So does a whip. The question is what is done and for whom. A workforce persuaded that next year will be better can be asked to accept a good deal this year. I do not call that an achievement of the human spirit. I call it a management technique.

X

I do not ask anyone to be unhappy. Be as happy as you can manage. I ask only that happiness be treated as weather, which comes and goes, and not as a debt owed to the firm.

What I am against is the bright future as an article of faith: the fixed, smiling certainty that excuses every present failure and cannot itself

be checked. A belief that cannot be checked is a superstition. This one happens to be the superstition of educated people.

XI

What, then, is to be done? You will notice that the question assumes a bright future after all, in which the thing has been done. I decline it in that form.

I offer a smaller one. What is to be kept going? There is a roof that wants mending, a neighbour who has not been seen this week, a service that survives because one tired person has not yet given up. Attend to those. They have the advantage of existing.

XII

I expect to be told that these theses are bleak. They are the least bleak thing I know how to say. The bleak thing is to be promised a morning by people who have sold the lamp.

If we are to have a future at all it will not be bright. It will be patched, argued over and held together by habit, like everything else that has ever lasted. I should prefer that to the other kind. One can live in a patched house. Nobody has yet moved into a promise.

ABOUT THIS TEXT

TITLE	Against the Bright Future: Twelve Theses on Optimism
AUTHOR	Ottoline Brack
DATE	1978
TYPE	Pamphlet
PUBLISHER	Guttering Wick Press
EXTENT	16 pages, letterpress cover, edition of 300
LANGUAGE	English
SOURCE	Set from a copy of the first and only printing. Two misprints in the ninth thesis have been corrected against the author's marked proof.

Ottoline Brack worked for most of her life as a proofreader of technical manuals, an occupation she credited with teaching her "how confidently a thing may be asserted by people who have not tried it." She published one pamphlet. It was printed in an edition of three hundred by a two-person press, sold poorly, and was pulped when the press folded the following winter.

Against the Bright Future is a set of twelve numbered theses directed at what Brack calls official cheerfulness: the assumption, shared in her view by governments, employers and most of their opponents, that the future is a place where present difficulties will have been solved. She does not argue that things will get worse. Her claim is narrower and more irritating. It is that the promise of improvement is used to make present conditions tolerable, and that nobody who makes the promise expects to be held to it.

The pamphlet is the most frequently cited text in our theory room. See The Slow Apocalypse and Pessimism: A User's Manual.

COLOPHON

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