An 'Ism' for All Seasons: Intellectuals and their camp followers have found a new ideology

By PAUL JOHNSON

At the time when the Soviet empire collapsed in ignominy and the totalitarian system in Russia itself disintegrated, people asked: What will take its place in the minds of intellectuals and all those who believed in a utopia on earth? What "ism" would become paramount among the discontented of the West? We now know the answer: pessimism.

Communism was, in its origins, a critique of society, until it built monstrous societies of its own where criticism was not allowed. Pessimism too is a critique of society, also a habit of mind, an instinctive reflex, a paranoid psychosis, easy to acquire and to express, highly infectious, which can be made to apply to everything the established order does and produces.

Karl Popper, in his analysis of pseudo-scientific theories like Marxism and Freudianism, pointed out that their attraction lay in their apparent universality: They could be made to apply to almost any human event, collective or individual, providing explanations sufficiently coherent to satisfy educated people disinclined to inquire too deeply into difficult phenomena, and who merely want a quasi-religious creed in which to believe. Pessimism fits beautifully into this category. It applies to everything, simple or complex. It has coherency, consistency, and self-righteousness, and affords huge intellectual and emotional satisfaction to its believers.

It appeals particularly to the large number of people in modern society who emerge with credentials from our educational system but who may never acquire the money or power that free enterprise offers in such abundance to the imaginative and daring. Such people become teachers, in schools and universities, work in the lower ranks of government, national and local, are myriad in the media and entertainment, and, in their own way, are collectively important in forming opinion. University professors are the elite of this category, their success in academic pursuits giving them a high opinion of their own worth and importance. Yet, somehow, this is not reflected in their earning power, their ability to command men and women, and their control over events. Must there not be something fundamentally wrong with a society that gives such little practical recognition to their worth?

In the past, this feeling of outrage was expressed in the quest for an alternative society and a determination to build it through political or revolutionary action. That alternative has gone. No one believes in it anymore. The intelligentsia is stuck with the market system, the only one that works at all, because it fits in with human nature and all its imperfections. Forced to live with the market, but hating it all the same, unwilling prisoners (and beneficiaries) of a capitalism they cannot change but that is infinitely distasteful to them, they submit with relish to a pessimism that gives them relief from their feeling of powerlessness.

The case of the current war against terrorism is a perfect example of how the ideology of pessimism works. Opposition to terrorism, as such, is universally agreed. All agree it needs to be fought, somehow and in some way. But there agreement ends and pessimism takes over. Recall the sequence. First President Bush had no "evidence" that al-Qaeda was behind 9/11, still less that bin Laden was its mastermind. The pessimists wrung their hands at Bush's ignorant, intemperate, Texas-cowboy approach. Again, there was no "evidence" that al-Qaeda was linked to the Taliban. To attack the Taliban was a fatal error, sure to ignite an incendiary Islam against America. To invade Afghanistan was a strategic error of incalculable consequences. The invasion begun, it was clearly going badly. After a week, a fortnight, it was already seen to be a failure. Then, the Taliban having unaccountably collapsed and fled, America faced an endless guerrilla campaign, "another Vietnam."

Iraq was a similar story. The war was strategically misconceived, relying too much on air power because Bush was unwilling to face the countless casualties a land war would involve. After a week, a fortnight, it had clearly gone wrong, and the allies would be engulfed in endless fighting in Baghdad and Basra, "another Stalingrad." Then Saddam's legions unaccountably melted away and the war was over. His statue was pulled down to applause. But pessimism, proved hopelessly wrong again, quickly closed ranks and went on the offensive. Looting, a sure sign of disaster for Bush. The entire contents of Iraq's Museum of Antiquities -- a "priceless collection" -- had vanished, an "unprecedented disaster for civilization." When it was found in the vaults, carefully hidden by its curators, there were "missing pieces" ruthlessly sold on an "international market." Then came terrorist acts against U.S. and British forces -- yet "another Vietnam" on the way. No thought had been given to post-war Iraq. Thought had been given but it was all misguided. It would cost countless lives and unimaginable billions of dollars.
Such pessimism has taken an even stronger hold in Europe than in the U.S., for in Europe, pessimism, especially about Iraq, is the official policy of the German and, still more, French governments. President Chirac, for the time being at least, is Monsieur Pessimisme incarnate. There is much to be pessimistic about too. The French and German economies are in imminent danger of falling into the long-term stagnation that has enveloped Japan for a decade and a half, while America (and Britain) surges ahead. Monsieur Pessimisme cannot hold back the U.S. economy but he can make things as difficult as possible in Iraq by sabotaging any U.S. venture at the U.N. and spreading dismay in Europe and the Arab world.

The culture of pessimism has taken hold of Britain's Labour party, though not its leader Tony Blair, by habit and temperament an ebullient optimist -- one reason he gets on so well with George W. Bush. Behind Labour's pessimism is the British media, an engine of violent pessimism at the best of times, which has seized upon the situation in Iraq to produce a daily soap opera of woe. It has found a tragic-hero figure in one Dr. Kelly of the Ministry of Defence, an expert in chemical and biological weapons, the victim of acute depression who committed suicide, for reasons we do not know, or for no reason, earlier this year. Nothing is more foolish than to inquire into a suicide, as every coroner knows, but the government, in a moment of folly, has done just that, and set up a tribunal whose deliberations have dwelt lovingly on every dismal aspect of the Iraq war. This High Court of Pessimism filled the newspapers throughout the summer with bad news and gloomy reflections, all of which have tended to undermine the resolution and will of those in Britain, led by Tony Blair, to back George W. Bush in his defense of civilization against violent unreason.

But the culture of pessimism does not confine itself to international politics. Its destructive effects bear on every aspect of human endeavor. It seizes on incidents like the Enron affair, or the overpayment of the New York Stock Exchange chairman, to insist that capitalism and financial institutions are irredeemably corrupt and rendered satanic by huge greed. It points to the collapse of the talks at Cancun as damning evidence of a disastrous conflict between "have" and "have not" nations, which cannot be averted and must result in starvation and misery for hundreds of millions of people. It holds up the case of genetically modified crops as an instance of scientific madness that, far from making it easier to feed the world's undernourished, as sensible people believe, must instead lead to a catastrophe unless halted instantly.

The pessimists, from their redoubts in the media and the universities and the various world organizations and charities they have captured, wage propaganda wars against scientific advances and experiments of almost every kind, and prophesy plague and famine. "Global warming" has been their most successful exercise in Jeremiah strategy so far, persuading large numbers of nations -- not, happily, including the United States -- to reduce "emissions," that is, to put the brakes on their economies. Indeed, all the activities of the pessimists appear to have the common objective of slowing down the progress of the free-enterprise system in improving productivity and applying science to increase living standards throughout the world. Yet while doing all in their power to decelerate the wealth-producing process, the pessimists complain loudly that the poor are getting poorer.

There is always enough misery, failure, and unhappiness in the world to keep the pessimists in woeful high spirits. But if they had had their way, humanity would still be living in the Stone Age, if indeed it were still in existence. The fact is that hope is the energizer of men and women and optimism their natural condition. Time is on their side, as the whole history of human progress teaches, and in due course pessimism will go the same way as all the other dismal creeds. In the meantime, we need to exercise patience -- in Iraq and everywhere else.