

# The Habits of Highly Cynical People

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On April 24, 1916 — Easter Monday — Irish republicans in Dublin and a handful of other places staged an armed rebellion against British occupation. At the time, the British Empire was the strongest power on earth; Ireland was its first and nearest colony. That the puny colony might oust the giant seemed far-fetched, and by most measures the endeavor was a failure. The leaders were executed; the British occupation continued. But not for long: the Easter Uprising is now generally understood as a crucial step in a process that led, in 1937, to full independence for most of the island. A hundred years on, some view 1916 as the beginning of the end of the British Empire.

This year also marks the fifth anniversary of the Arab Spring. It seems to be taken for granted that these uprisings, too, were a failure, since many of the affected countries are now just different kinds of dire than they were before. But the public display of a passionate desire for participatory government, the demonstration of the strength of popular power and the weakness of despotic regimes, and the sheer (if short-lived) exhilaration that took place five years ago may have sown seeds that have not yet germinated.

I am not arguing for overlooking the violence and instability that are now plaguing North Africa and the Middle East. Nor am I optimistic about the near future of the region. I do not know what the long-term consequences of the Arab Spring will be — but neither does anyone else. We live in a time when the news media and other purveyors of conventional wisdom like to report on the future more than the past. They draw on polls and false analogies to announce what is going to happen next, and their frequent errors — about the unelectability of Barack Obama, say, or the inevitability of the Keystone XL pipeline — don't seem to impede their habit of prophecy or our willingness to abide them. "We don't actually know" is their least favorite thing to report.

Non-pundits, too, use bad data and worse analysis to pronounce with great certainty on future inevitabilities, present impossibilities, and past failures. The mind-set behind these statements is

what I call naïve cynicism. It bleeds the sense of possibility and maybe the sense of responsibility out of people.

Cynicism is first of all a style of presenting oneself, and it takes pride more than anything in not being fooled and not being foolish. But in the forms in which I encounter it, cynicism is frequently both these things. That the attitude that prides itself on world-weary experience is often so naïve says much about the triumph of style over substance, attitude over analysis.

Maybe it also says something about the tendency to oversimplify. If simplification means reducing things to their essentials, oversimplification tosses aside the essential as well. It is a relentless pursuit of certainty and clarity in a world that generally offers neither, a desire to shove nuances and complexities into clear-cut binaries. Naïve cynicism concerns me because it flattens out the past and the future, and because it reduces the motivation to participate in public life, public discourse, and even intelligent conversation that distinguishes shades of gray, ambiguities and ambivalences, uncertainties, unknowns, and opportunities. Instead, we conduct our conversations like wars, and the heavy artillery of grim confidence is the weapon many reach for.

Naïve cynics shoot down possibilities, including the possibility of exploring the full complexity of any situation. They take aim at the less cynical, so that cynicism becomes a defensive posture and an avoidance of dissent. They recruit through brutality. If you set purity and perfection as your goals, you have an almost foolproof system according to which everything will necessarily fall short. But expecting perfection is naïve; failing to perceive value by using an impossible standard of measure is even more so. Cynics are often disappointed idealists and upholders of unrealistic standards. They are uncomfortable with victories, because victories are almost always temporary, incomplete, and compromised — but also because the openness of hope is dangerous, and in war, self-defense comes first. Naïve cynicism is absolutist; its practitioners assume that anything you don't deplore you wholeheartedly endorse. But denouncing anything less than perfection as morally compromising means pursuing aggrandizement of the self, not engagement with a place or system or community, as the highest priority.

Different factions have different versions of naïve cynicism. There is, for example, the way the mainstream discounts political action that proceeds outside the usual corridors of power. When

Occupy Wall Street began five years ago, the movement was mocked, dismissed, and willfully misunderstood before it was hastily pronounced dead. Its obituary has been written dozens of times over the years by people who'd prefer that the rabble who blur the lines between the homeless and the merely furious not have a political role to play.

But the fruits of OWS are too many to count. People who were involved with local encampments tell me that their thriving offshoots are still making a difference. California alone was said to have more than 100 Occupy groups; what each of them did is impossible to measure. There were results as direct as homeless advocacy, as indirect as a shift in the national debate about housing, medical and student debt, economic injustice, and inequality. There has also been effective concrete action — from debt strikes to state legislation — on these issues. Occupy helped to bring politicians such as Bernie Sanders, Bill de Blasio, and Elizabeth Warren into the mainstream.

The inability to assess what OWS accomplished comes in part from the assumption that historical events either produce straightforward, quantifiable, immediate results, or they fail to matter. It's as though we're talking about bowling: either that ball knocked over those pins in that lane or it didn't. But historical forces are not bowling balls. If bowling had to be the metaphor, it would be some kind of metaphysical game shrouded in mists and unfolding over decades. The ball might knock over a pin and then another one in fifteen years and possibly have a strike in some other lane that most of us had forgotten even existed. That's sort of what the Easter Rising did, and what Occupy and Black Lives Matter are doing now.

Then there is the naïve cynicism of those outside the mainstream who similarly doubt their own capacity to help bring about change, a view that conveniently spares them the hard work such change requires.

I recently posted on Facebook a passage from the February issue of *Nature Climate Change* in which a group of scientists outlined the impact of climate change over the next 10,000 years. Their portrait is terrifying, but it is not despairing: “This long-term view shows that the next few decades offer a brief window of opportunity to minimize large-scale and potentially catastrophic climate change that will extend longer than the entire history of human civilization thus far.”

That’s a sentence about catastrophe but also about opportunity. Yet when I posted the article, the first comment I got was, “There’s nothing that’s going to stop the consequences of what we have already done/not done.” This was another way of saying, I’m pitting my own casual assessment over peer-reviewed science; I’m not reading carefully; I’m making a thwacking sound with my false omniscience.

Such comments represent a reflex response that can be used to meet wildly different stimuli. Naïve cynicism remains obdurate in the face of varied events, some of which are positive, some negative, some mixed, and quite a lot of them unfinished.

The climate movement has grown powerful and diverse. On this continent it is shutting down coal plants and preventing new ones from being built. It has blocked fracking, oil and gas leases on public land, drilling in the Arctic, pipelines, and oil trains that carry the stuff that would otherwise run through the thwarted pipelines. Cities, states, and regions are making stunning commitments — San Diego has committed to going 100 percent renewable by 2035.

Remarkable legislation has been introduced even on the national level, such as bills in both the House and the Senate to bar new fossil-fuel extraction on public lands. Those bills will almost certainly not pass in the present Congress, but they introduce to the mainstream a position that was inconceivable a few years ago. This is how epochal change often begins, with efforts that fail in their direct aims but succeed in shifting the conversation and opening space for further action.

These campaigns and achievements are far from enough; they need to scale up, and scaling up means drawing in people who recognize that there are indeed opportunities worth seizing.

Late last year, some key federal decisions to curtail drilling for oil in the Arctic and to prevent the construction of a tar-sands pipeline were announced. The naïvely cynical dismissed them as purely a consequence of the plummeting price of oil. Activism had nothing to do with it, I was repeatedly told. But had there been no activism, the Arctic would have been drilled, and the pipelines to get the dirty crude cheaply out of Alberta built, before the price drop. It wasn’t either-or; it was both.

David Roberts, a climate journalist for *Vox*, notes that the disparagement of the campaign to stop the Keystone XL pipeline assumed that the activists' only goal was to prevent this one pipeline from being built, and that since this one pipeline's cancellation wouldn't save the world, the effort was futile. Roberts named these armchair quarterbacks of climate action the Doing It Wrong Brigade. He compared their critique to "criticizing the Montgomery bus boycott because it only affected a relative handful of blacks. The point of civil-rights campaigns was not to free blacks from discriminatory systems one at a time. It was to change the culture."

The Keystone fight was a transnational education in tar-sands and pipeline politics, as well as in the larger dimensions of climate issues. It was a successful part of a campaign to wake people up and make them engage with the terrifying stakes in this conflict. It changed the culture.

Similarly, the decision by Congress in December to allow crude oil to be exported was widely excoriated, and it was indeed a bad thing. But many commenters ignored the fact that it was part of a quid pro quo that extended tax credits for solar and wind power. Those who have studied the matter closely, such as Michael Levi and Varun Sivaram at the Council on Foreign Relations, believe that this extension "will do far more to reduce carbon dioxide emissions over the next five years than lifting the export ban will do to increase them."

Accommodating change and uncertainty requires a looser sense of self, an ability to respond in various ways. This is perhaps why qualified success unsettles those who are locked into fixed positions. The shift back to failure is a defensive measure. It is, in the end, a technique for turning away from the always imperfect, often important victories that life on earth provides — and for lumping things together regardless of scale. If corruption is evenly distributed and ubiquitous, then there is no adequate response — or, rather, no response is required. This is so common an attitude that Bill McKibben launched a preemptive strike against it when he first wrote about the revelations last fall that Exxon knew about climate change as early as the 1970s: A few observers, especially on the professionally jaded left, have treated the story as old news — as something that even if we didn't know, we knew. "Of course they lied," someone told me. That cynicism, however, serves as the most effective kind of cover for Exxon.

Even so, in response to the Exxon news, I heard many say airily, "Oh, all corporations lie." But the revelations were indeed news. The scale is different from any corrupt and dishonest thing a

corporation has ever done, and it's important to appreciate the difference. The dismissive "it's all corrupt" line of reasoning pretends to excoriate what it ultimately excuses.

When a corporation writes something off, it accepts the cost. When we write off corporations as inherently corrupt, we accept the cost, too. Doing so paves the way for passivity and defeat. The superb and uncynical journalists at the *Los Angeles Times* and *Inside Climate News* who investigated Exxon, along with the activists who pushed on the issue, prompted the attorneys general of New York and California to launch investigations. And the revelations offer us opportunities to respond — in David Roberts's terms, to change the culture more. Like the much-disparaged fossil-fuel-divestment movement, the attacks on Exxon have delegitimized a major power in ways that can have far-reaching consequences.

What is the alternative to naïve cynicism? An active response to what arises, a recognition that we often don't know what is going to happen ahead of time, and an acceptance that whatever takes place will usually be a mixture of blessings and curses. Such an attitude is bolstered by historical memory, by accounts of indirect consequences, unanticipated cataclysms and victories, cumulative effects, and long timelines. Naïve cynicism loves itself more than the world; it defends itself in lieu of the world. I'm interested in the people who love the world more, and in what they have to tell us, which varies from day to day, subject to subject. Because what we do begins with what we believe we can do. It begins with being open to the possibilities and interested in the complexities.