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Abandon all hope

by [Andrew Klavan](#)

Like many leftist nostrums, the doctrine sometimes known as political correctness accomplishes almost exactly the opposite of what it intends. The general P.C. idea is that there is some effective virtue in believing that what is fair is also true. If it seems good to us that all races should be of equal gifts and capabilities or that any disparity in competencies between the sexes is the result of societal influences rather than genetics, well, then we have only to close our lying eyes and think it so, and so it will someday be. Anyone who allows any expression of doubt or disagreement to cross his mind or pass his lips must be shamed into silence—the shame and silence themselves becoming instruments of the social change that will ultimately make the wished-for truth the truth indeed.

Yet rather than make the world less racist or sexist, political correctness only really serves to lend to both racism and sexism a glamour of individualism and honesty. So thrilled are we when P.C.'s tyrannical authority over our consciences is challenged by some direct expression of observation, common sense, or just good old-fashioned prejudice that we are startled into laughter. It's as delightful as watching a nun sit on a fifth grader's tack. Thus, I started laughing when I read the title of John Derbyshire's new book and continued laughing straight through to the end. This in spite of the book's thesis, which *is* its title: *We Are Doomed*.^[1]

The “we” is Western civilization, and the reason we're doomed, according to Derbyshire, has, in fact, a lot to do with political correctness or, at least, with its underlying assumption that the more unpleasant facts of life and human nature are culturally determined and therefore subject to change. Seduced by the false hope implicit in that assumption—or fearing the social ostracism that attends *not* being seduced—the best of us (we conservatives, of course) have lost our commitment to philosophical pessimism. In other words, if only we believed we were doomed, we might not be. Despair is our only hope.

Readers of *National Review* will recognize Derbyshire's name, and perhaps even shorten it to a friendly Derb. He's the mordantly witty former computer programmer who writes a regular *National Review* column, using his life as a British-American *paterfamilias* in suburban Long Island as a jumping-off point for disquisitions both learned and cranky on politics, science, and pretty much everything else. What distinguishes him from the rest of the distinguished *National Review* crowd is the ferociously non-doctrinal nature of his beliefs. He favors abortion rights and euthanasia. He opposed the last president's wars and expansive foreign policies. And though he expresses a well-reasoned disdain for dismissive atheism, he himself has lost his faith.

Plus, he's racist and sexist—and I mean that in the nicest possible way. That is, he believes that race and sex (or *gender*, as he so very rightly refuses to call it) play substantially determinative roles in many important human characteristics, including kinds and quantities of intelligence. Whites and

Asians have evolved with higher I.Q.s than blacks and Hispanics. Men have evolved to be better at math than women. And so on. To believe otherwise, Derbyshire says, is to be guilty of a left-wing version of creationism, the idea that “the ordinary rules of biological evolution ceased to apply to *homo homo sapiens* when our species emerged from Africa.”

In *We Are Doomed*, Derbyshire’s complaint—the big complaint into which he folds all his many smaller complaints—is that conservatives have not only forsaken such hard-boiled realism about the human condition but also its practical corollaries:

the recognition that there is little hope for improvement in this world; that such small hope as there is should be directed toward the actions of one, or a few; and that most of what governments do is wicked, when not merely pointless and counterproductive.

Instead, conservatives have bitten into the smiley-faced apple of optimistic delusion—the delusion that we can somehow improve the lot of mankind either through large-scale social engineering or simply by pretending very loudly that things are other than the way they are. Derbyshire’s response: “Happy talk and wishful thinking are for children, fools and leftists. We are conservatives. We know better.”

From this starting point, he goes on to detail what exactly he thinks we do know: that the joys of “diversity” are largely non-existent; that illegal immigration will destroy our country if not curtailed; that the federal government has become over-powerful and its arrogant, dishonest politicians immovably entrenched; that our economy has been overspent into ruin, that our culture is exhausted; that men are becoming powerless and redundant, even while women remain particularly susceptible to unrealistic and authoritarian ideas of governance; that our educational system is a racket run by corrupt unions and nutso ideologues; that our religion is dying in the face of science; and that science offers precious little consolation for the tragedy of life. And that’s just the good news. The bad news is that it’s pretty much too late to do anything about any of it, except notice it, which, as Derbyshire points out, has its own compensations: “We pessimists ... are not only wiser than the smiley-face crowd; we are *better people* ... because we know that most of the improvements that can be made in human affairs must be made by us ourselves.”

Now, it might seem that this whole end-of-western-civilization business is poor material from which to fashion an amusing read. Yet even at its we-are-doomiest, *We Are Doomed* possesses a droll buoyancy that makes pessimism seem, in Derbyshire’s *mot juste*, “bracing.” His glum British humor, his unswervingly scientific approach, and his pure fearlessness in expressing his opinions made this reader burst out laughing every couple of disconsolate pages. The best moments—and they pervade the book—are when Derbyshire dissects clearly mendacious leftist academic studies, social theories, and journalistic practices meant not to inform but to hide or disguise uncomfortable facts. Pointing out that both educational authorities and news agencies have conspired to suppress information about the racial make-up of the criminal classes, for instance, Derbyshire remarks, “The assumption is that if not told these things, the great slack-jawed, dimwitted, unwashed mass of Americans will make no assumptions of their own.” Exactly. It’s at moments like this that *We Are Doomed* feels like a barbecue of sacred cows: meaty, with an iconoclastic wickedness that adds a certain spice.

It does seem possible, however, that in the dark night of happy horse manure that is American public discourse, Derbyshire’s politically incorrect responses shine with a greater brightness than they inherently deserve. Derbyshire’s pessimism is radiant by comparison to P.C. malarkey—but is it only by comparison? Hard to say; impossible, at this point, to know. I do know that I frequently found myself accepting Derbyshire’s premises only to balk at his conclusions. While the hysterical social crucifixion of those who notice differences in intelligence and talents among ethnic groups can only create a world of lies and a breeding ground for disastrous social policy, that doesn’t necessarily

mean that such differences are either intractable or decisive. Derbyshire clearly believes they are, or at least that it's "not an unreasonable assumption, given the great effort we have invested in erasing those differences, with such meager results."

Yet the dysfunction in poor black communities, for example, seems to me the *product* of precisely those wrong-headed efforts—so much so that I can't help thinking a change might do some good. A true meritocracy, with educational rigor across the board and no special allowances for race or sex, might lead to more surprising results than Derbyshire predicts. Seems worth a try anyway, in the understanding that there are many different pathways to many different kinds of success, and perhaps also in the simple faith that there's a place in the world for us all. Which, by the way, is another thing. Lying somewhere between gloomy apocalypticism and brainless optimism, a faith well-grounded in the tragic sensibility does seem to me to be a reasonable third option: faith, if not in the beneficent purposes of God, at least in the eternally recurring resurgence of man's better wisdom.

But never mind. Such rebuttals are in no way meant as criticism of this delightfully morose frolic down the yellow-brick road to hell. Inspiring inner argument is one of the things good books do. On this, at any rate, Derbyshire and I are in complete agreement: the mendacity of hope is poison to intelligent discourse. Whether one ultimately finds his way to faith or despair, pessimism—that is to say, realism—is the only reasonable starting point.

Notes

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1. *We Are Doomed: Reclaiming Conservative Pessimism*, by John Derbyshire; Crown Forum, 261 pages, \$26. [Go back to the text.](#)

Andrew Klavan is a contributing editor at *City Journal* and the author of such bestselling crime novels as *True Crime* and *Empire of Lies*.

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