

New research shows how politics manipulates a culture of optimism

May 22 2015, by Alison Rowan

Whilst the UK suffers the post-election blues, a new book by Professor Oliver Bennett, founder of the University of Warwick's Centre for Cultural Policy Studies, looks at how societies maintain hope in the future in an increasingly divided and threatening world.

"Cultures of Optimism: The Institutional Promotion of Hope" provides a fresh take on the notion of optimism and considers the role played by so many of our institutions in the active promotion of [hope](#).

"The notion of an optimistic future is all pervasive, we are all chasing our own version of a hopeful future and in turn being peddled notions of hope by the many powerful institutions around us" said Professor Bennett.

"Take the recent election campaign – each party tried to sell us their vision of an optimistic future – that's how electioneering works. Since the future can never be predicted, elections in the end are always about hope. But here's the problem: we demand optimistic visions of the [future](#) – parties never win elections by telling us that things are going to get worse. Yet when they do, we blame the politicians. It's the great paradox of democratic politics."

This active selling of hope doesn't begin and end with the political parties; Professor Bennett argues that this all-pervasive hope-peddling crosses many aspects of modern culture:

"The emergence in recent years of the self-help groups and gurus encouraging us to become 'magnets' for positivity, to 'ask, believe and receive' is in fact nothing new. They come from a long tradition of optimism promoters, offering a particular brand of hope and meaning. An entire self-help industry, which can be traced back years, is now built upon it, with a huge market in books, seminars and online applications".

"Religion itself of course is no stranger to selling hope – and is perhaps the longest running propagator of a vision of a brighter tomorrow – even today's suicide bombers have been sold a vision of optimism by their religion, moving them to give up on a version of hope in this world and instead focus on the promise of hope in the next."

"What is interesting is that the processes of these institutions frequently go unobserved and yet they are in incredibly strong influence on how people act in the present, from how society votes to how we choose to live or indeed - in some extreme cases - die.

Professor Bennett's book *Cultures of Optimism: The Institutional Promotion of Hope* is a sequel to his acclaimed book on cultural pessimism. In an original and wide-ranging study, encompassing politics, business, religion, the family and the self-help industry, Professor Bennett addresses some highly topical and important questions: what are the functions of optimism in modern societies? How and why do institutions promote it? What values and attitudes are involved?

Provided by University of Warwick

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