While the accomplishments of (and the existing problems with) 20th century ingenuity are clear, their implications for the future are highly contested as techno-optimists clash with critics of technical advances. In this context, it is useful to remember that even the most destructive technical advances were not responsible for most of the man-made deaths during the 20th century. There is nothing inevitable about the long-term survival of civilization based on technical ingenuity and high energy consumption: openness and uncertainty best describe our prospects.

This chapter is about a second “great divide” in attitudes about government and appropriate crime policy. The focus is not on the well-known ideological battle between left and right about crime policy, but on a more subtle contrast between optimism and pessimism about the effectiveness of governmental policies to control crime. Crime-control optimists are persons who think that what they regard as appropriate government efforts can dramatically reduce crime. A pessimist thinks that even the best tools available to government will have a minor impact on crime rates. The chapter considers the factors that influence
how strongly experts, as well as citizens, believe that governmental actions can significantly influence crime rates. The main thesis is that a long period of declining crime provides an environment where those concerned about crime policy tend to believe that this year's actions by government can have substantial impact on next year's crime rate. Sustained eras of good or bad news push moods about effectiveness further than the facts warrant—what tends to happen is an overreaction rather than merely an empirically based set of changed perceptions.

The First Serious Optimist
Ian Kumekawa

Published in print: 2017 Published Online: May 2018
Publisher: Princeton University Press DOI: 10.23943/
Item type: book

This book is an intellectual biography of the British economist A. C. Pigou (1877–1959), a founder of welfare economics and one of the twentieth century's most important and original thinkers. Though long overshadowed by his intellectual rival John Maynard Keynes, Pigou was instrumental in focusing economics on the public welfare. And his reputation is experiencing a renaissance today, in part because his idea of “externalities” or spillover costs is the basis of carbon taxes. The book tells how Pigou reshaped the way the public thinks about the economic role of government and the way economists think about the public good. Setting Pigou's ideas in their personal, political, social, and ethical context, the book follows him as he evolved from a liberal Edwardian bon vivant to a reserved but reform-minded economics professor. With World War I, Pigou entered government service, but soon became disenchanted with the state he encountered. As his ideas were challenged in the interwar period, he found himself increasingly alienated from his profession. But with the rise of the Labour Party following World War II, the elderly Pigou re-embraced a mind-set that inspired a colleague to describe him as “the first serious optimist.” The story is not just of Pigou but also of twentieth-century economics, the book explores the biographical and historical origins of some of the most important economic ideas of the past hundred years. It is a timely reminder of the ethical roots of economics and the discipline's long history as an active intermediary between the state and the market.
The relationship between poetry and the visual arts is seldom close and never simple. But special difficulties attend the study of it in the eighth century BC in Greece, when evidence is not only in excessively short supply but, when it does come, is almost by definition ambiguous. On the whole, regarding the question of the interpretation of late geometric vase-paintings and other eighth-century art there are well-established opposing positions: each new discovery finds a different interpretation on the part of what may be called the optimists — those who seek for correspondences between Homer's epics and the visual arts — and of the sceptics, who habitually argue that there is no evidence for anything of the kind. Each party appears to have found an outlet for the promulgation of its view, inasmuch as many general or semi-popular accounts of geometric and other early Greek art present it as having a major mythological content derived from epic poetry.

Matters of Life and Death
David A. Davis

This chapter discusses teaching Eudora Welty's novel The Optimist’s Daughter in a course on deathways in southern literature. Deathways are the social and cultural practices surrounding the human experience of death. Welty’s novel challenges the notion of a good death and illustrates the customs and rituals of grief, burial, the funeral industry, and memory in the mid-century South. Students in the course described in the chapter compared Welty’s depiction of death to the works of several other southern writers and addressed complicated issues of burdensome memory, death symbolism, and social construction of death.
Economic Growth and the Environment
Clas Eriksson

This book explores the debate on how to reconcile economic growth with protection of the natural environment, and the closely related discussion on whether an increasing scarcity of natural resources will eventually force economic growth to cease. The debate focuses on whether environmental policies will benefit the economy or not, and is divided into growth optimists and growth pessimists. In general, economists have been optimistic and have pointed to the possibilities of technological progress and substitution, yet they also acknowledge that natural resources and environmental concern do restrict economic growth. The difficulty lies in quantifying the constraint to economic growth. Modern growth economists have constructed models to examine to what extent ‘growth pessimism’ is theoretically warranted. This book provides an introduction to some of these models, brings together the discussion between growth optimists and pessimists, and presents the theory behind their arguments. It presents models where both sides can meet and where both are able to derive expected results with the parameter values that they deem appropriate. From there, the discussions can turn to the empirical observations about these parameters.

Never Saw It Coming
Karen A. Cerulo

People—especially Americans—are by and large optimists. They're much better at imagining best-case scenarios (I could win the lottery!) than worst-case scenarios (A hurricane could destroy my neighborhood!). This is true not just of their approach to imagining the future, but of their memories as well: people are better able to describe the best moments of their lives than they are the worst. Though there are psychological reasons for this phenomenon, this book considers instead the role of society in fostering this attitude. What kinds of communities develop this pattern of thought, which do not, and what does that say about human ability to evaluate possible outcomes of decisions and events? This book travels to diverse realms of experience, including intimate
family relationships, key transitions in our lives, the places we work and play, and the boardrooms of organizations and bureaucracies.

Using interviews, surveys, artistic and fictional accounts, media reports, historical data, and official records, it illuminates one of the most common, yet least studied, of human traits—a blatant disregard for worst-case scenarios.

“The Whole Heart Of Fiction”

Jonathan W. Gray

in Civil Rights in the White Literary Imagination: Innocence by Association

Published in print: 2013 Published Online: March 2014
Item type: chapter

This chapter focuses on the writer Eudora Welty, and how she published very little between 1955 and 1970, a period that coincides with the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement as the dominant political and social thought in the United States. The only manuscript Welty produced within the period, which was also a trying time in her life, was a brief children’s story called The Shoe Bird. Welty could not focus on her writing because of her demanding mother, who drove away the homecare nurses that Welty hired, and it was only when Welty was able to free herself from her familial duties that she was able to get back to writing. When she did, she produced her two finest novels: Losing Battles and The Optimist’s Daughter.

Introduction: An Agile Mind—The Many Stands of Preston Sturges

Jeff Jaeckle

in Refocus: the Films of Preston Sturges

Published in print: 2015 Published Online: May 2017
DOI: 10.3366/edinburgh/9781474406550.003.0015
Item type: chapter

This chapter challenges the reining views of Sturges as an ambivalent figure torn between art and commerce, especially as promulgated in popular writings by James Agee; instead, the chapter proposes new descriptive clusters or patterns that cut across every aspect of the filmmaker’s life: creator, businessman, wordsmith, skeptic, and optimist. These terms provide a good sense of the personality, vitality, and talents that made Sturges such a compelling figure, with the first three speaking
to his aptitudes and endeavours, and the latter two characterizing his attitudes and worldview. Rather than set these terms in opposition, the chapter puts them in conversation to illustrate the complexities of Sturges’s remarkable life and to shed light on why he was, and continues to be, such a pivotal figure in Hollywood cinema and American culture.

Joe Lawlor and Christine Molloy

in Last Words: Considering Contemporary Cinema

Published in print: 2014 Published Online: November 2015
Item type: chapter

This chapter presents an interview with filmmakers Joe Lawlor and Christine Molloy. Over the last four years Molloy and Lawlor have been working on a project called Civic Life, which involves local community groups in the production of nine high-quality short films for the cinema. In 2004, their film Who Killed Brown Owl won the award for Best British Short Film at the Edinburgh International Film Festival. In January 2008 their latest short film Joy won the Prix UIP Rotterdam at the International Film Festival Rotterdam. Helen (2008), the first feature of the duo, who work under the title of Desperate Optimists, marks the culmination of the Civic Life series. The interview covered topics such as how Desperate Optimists and their initial work in community theatre and experimental performance began; the benefits of working with community groups; and how they found the transition from shorter pieces to feature-length work.

The Demise of Tribal Politics, 1955–1985

Carol V. R. George

in God’s Salesman: Norman Vincent Peale and the Power of Positive Thinking

Published in print: 2019 Published Online: April 2019
Item type: chapter

This chapter examines the demise of Norman Vincent Peale’s tribal politics during the period 1955–1985. Peale viewed politics, like religion, as a very personal matter. His strong commitment to the Prohibition struggle emanated in large part from a sense of tribal loyalty. The chapter first considers Peale’s ties to the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) before discussing his personal politics and his involvement in local politics. It then analyzes Peale’s participation in
efforts to prevent the nomination of the Roman Catholic Senator John F. Kennedy as presidential candidate in 1960, his friendship with Richard Nixon, and the controversy sparked by the so-called Peale group, which issued a statement indicting the politics of the Roman Catholic Church following a press conference in Washington. It also recounts Peale’s dispute with John Bennett, dean of Union Seminary’s faculty at the time, and concludes with an assessment of his book “The Tough-Minded Optimist.”