

Who Woulda Think It?

If there's a foundational tenet to the Armchair's socioeconomic perspectives, it's that everything operates within the same lifecycle—birth, life, death and then rebirth. As has been established in the world of physics, energy is neither created nor destroyed. It just transmutes from one form to another. The death of one form of energy creates the birth of another.

Economy has its own cycle, as we are all learning or relearning today—either for the first time, if you are in your twenties; the second time, if you are in your thirties; the third time, if you are in your forties...you get the picture. No one is taking the word “cycle” out of the dictionary anytime soon.

Now that we are aware economic cycles exist, it may be worthwhile to consider the cycle of social consciousness, or what we could call the sociological cycle.

Sociology is the study of the development, structure and functioning of human society. More simply, it is the essence of how society thinks and feels; which influences how society looks at circumstances and challenges; which influences the decisions we make, the people we elect to office, the eventual laws that are passed and government's influence over people's daily life.

Sociological cycles are longer than economic cycles. Economic cycles—from expansion to contraction and back again—typically happen over a decade or so. But sociological cycles tend to happen over the course of a couple to a few generations. It generally takes major step change socioeconomic events to alter the direction of a country's social consciousness.

As an example, it took World War II to pull the United States out of an economic and sociological depression. First came the need to act after Pearl Harbor, which “distracted” citizenry from the gloomy experiences of the Great Depression. Then came the hard work and sacrifice it took to fight wars in two different parts of the world. Then came the euphoria of winning the war and saving millions of people from the ravages of totalitarianism.

After World War II, the United States was on top of the world, a far cry from the more recent depths of the Great Depression. And since so much of the world's physical infrastructure had been destroyed, it was left to the United States to rebuild the world. From the depths of socioeconomic depression came a great deal of accomplishment and confidence. Post-WWII America was now the top dog, the Big Kahuna.

There is never a static point of economic or social existence, as everything exists within its always-evolving lifecycle. The victory of World War II cured America's depression. We no longer had to sacrifice to survive. It was time to enjoy our newfound pride and economic power. As American economic and global influence grew, the conservatism that defined the Great Depression and WWII made way for more liberal thinking. Confidence from being top dog inspired more “free thought” about utopian goals. There was no more immediate struggle to put food on the table, to save family from despair.

As is the case for all sociological trends, they grow and grow and grow until for some reason they stop, then turn a new direction. The most recent obvious change in direction occurred after World War II, when Senator Joseph McCarthy conducted his “witch hunts” for communists. McCarthyism signaled the death of that conservative sociological lifecycle and the birth of the next liberal sociological lifecycle.

Liberal thinking has grown in prominence since the post-McCarthy era. However, it has reached its zenith. It is now in decline, and we’re experiencing another directional change in social consciousness. The evidence is in plain view.

The actions of today’s liberals are little different from someone who is drowning—flailing and thrashing about, shouting and screaming, cursing the reasons for their impending death. Their only focus is survival. This has given way to a “win at any cost” mentality, where name calling, blaming, lying, cheating, “cancelling,” free speech “management” and extreme intolerance define their agenda and actions. They have launched their own “witch hunts,” this time for racists and those who fail the so-called “purity” test. This manic effort to remain on top and in control is evidence of this “ism’s” fall from relevance.

But why did liberalism reach a point of diminishing returns?

When the country was working its way through the Great Depression and World War II, the sociological focus was community. We were all in this together. We collaborated and sacrificed to reduce and manage enormous burdens. As President John F. Kennedy said in his 1961 inaugural address, “Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.”

That notion of shared commitment, shared sacrifice and shared community no longer exists in liberal consciousness. It has been replaced by a “my way or the highway” elitist edict. “Free speech, only if we agree with it.” “Free enterprise, only by our rules.” “History is how we, and only we, define it.” “Your morals must be our morals, your thinking must be our thinking, your doing must be something we approve of.”

This totalitarian orientation is what happens when an “ism” has gained too much influence within social consciousness. It also triggers its demise.

The totalitarian stage is reached when one way of thinking has been untested for too long. Without tests or pushback, a social consciousness lives within a self-reinforcing feedback loop. And after a period of time that trend of thinking becomes so rigid that it lacks the flexibility to consider alternative points of view. Something that cannot bend can only break.

What breaks the pattern of social consciousness? It has always been economy.

When economy is easy, it’s easy to think and act liberally. When economy is difficult, thinking and acting conservative become necessary for survival.

Today, our country struggles to sustain itself. Just look at our broken economy, our exploding debt, our fractured society, our cities in decline, the prevalence of narcissistic behavior, the growth of violence and insecurity and the hollowing of our middle class. These are not challenges that have surfaced over the last four years. These have been brewing for forty or more years. In an odd sort of way, or maybe not odd at all, COVID-19 is the new Pearl Harbor.

If you step back to consider the big picture, we're actually ten years into the transition from a liberal- to a conservative-minded social consciousness.

Liberalism gained liftoff momentum in the 1960s, after McCarthyism pushed conservative thought to its totalitarian stage. The current cycle of liberalism looks to have peaked when Obama was elected president. Today's "thrashing about" is evidence of liberalism reaching its totalitarian stage.

The Tea Party Movement, founded in 2009, was this conservative cycle's liftoff. The Tea Party movement was the actionable effort that showed a "something seems amiss" feeling creeping into the American consciousness. It should not surprise that this liftoff coincided with the Great Recession.

After Obama was elected, a conservative wave swept through state governments. Then Trump was elected, fueling more momentum towards conservative, nationally-focused values. More momentum is coming, starting with the Supreme Court that looks to be returning to originalist constitutional law over the partisan influence of the last several decades.

These trends in social consciousness are not binary events. As mentioned, they happen over long periods of time, with a series of events sustaining their momentum, until the consciousness becomes too rigid and dogmatic to survive.

Just as the stock market doesn't go up or down in a straight line, social consciousness also has its fits and starts with a directional bias. Liberal consciousness continued to grow even as Reagan and other Republicans were president, while conservative consciousness continued to grow when Obama was president.

Even if Biden is elected president, the conservative march forward will likely continue for a few more decades. After all, there is no quick fix to our economic and social problems. And as Albert Einstein said: "No problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it."

Drive around rural America. Four years ago, there were no political signs. Today rural America is littered with Trump signs. Conservatives have been newly-minted or are coming out of the closet. They are not going back, even if there is a blue wave on November 3rd.

If Democrats do sweep this election, it will likely lead to a split in the Democrat party—the crack we did not see in the Bush II and Trump presidencies. With no common enemy, Democrats will turn on themselves. And if there is a large effort to push all the current radical progressive ideas through to actual policy, the likely reaction will be a rapid and sweeping snap back of conservative thinking and policy.

The current population of conservatives in Washington and around the country don't have all the answers. Many of their policy positions also lack common sense, or they are incomplete in their depth and breadth of thought. No one has all the answers at this time. But no one ever does. This is how progress "works"—in fits and starts.

Throw desire in the room with trial and error and out will come progress. But we have to remember, along the path of progress comes a lot of error.

The country's Founding Fathers set the system up so trial-and-error "chaos" would be the rule, not the exception because too much order, one way or another, oppresses citizenry. Don't expect this budding conservative cycle to last forever. It too will reach its own point of diminishing returns, like it did in the 1940s and 1950s and like we're witnessing with liberalism today. But the sociological lifecycle cannot be stopped. Today, liberalism is dying, and conservative values are expanding. Because, at the end of the day, what a society feels and thinks and how it acts is always the result of economy.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Doug", with a stylized, flowing script.

Douglas A, Leyendecker
713-862-3030
doug@armchaireco.com