

Humans Are Bad at Predicting Futures That Don't Benefit Them

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Between 1956 and 1962, the University of Cape Town psychologist Kurt Danziger asked 436 South African high-school and college students to imagine they were future historians. Write an essay predicting how the rest of the 20th century unfolds, he told them. “This is not a test of imagination—just describe what you really expect to happen,” the instructions read.

Of course, everyone wrote about apartheid. Roughly two-thirds of black Africans and 80 percent of Indian descendants predicted social and political changes amounting to the end of apartheid. Only 4 percent of white Afrikaners, on the other hand, thought the same. How did they get it so wrong?

Students’ predictions were more like fantasies. “Those who were the beneficiaries of the existing state of affairs were extremely reluctant to predict its end,” Danziger explains, “while those who felt oppressed by the same situation found it all too easy to foresee its collapse.”

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University of Pennsylvania’s Philip Tetlock, who studies the art and science of forecasting, says that strongly held beliefs are a big reason people make bad predictions.