

## THE BRIGHT SIDE

# Forget Utopia. Ignore Dystopia. Embrace Protopia!

Some proponents of protopian thinking believe that it can lead us to a better future. Others maintain we're already living in a protopia.

By [Joshua Needelman](#)

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The Bright Side is a series about how optimism works in our minds and affects the world around us.

In 2009, Kevin Kelly, the white-bearded futurist and co-founder of Wired magazine, was searching his brain for a word that did not yet exist.

“Either we're headed for a dystopia or we're headed for a utopia,” Mr. Kelly, 70, recalled in a recent interview, describing the prevailing attitudes about the future at the time. “Neither of those seemed to be feasible, or even desirable.”

So Mr. Kelly coined a term to describe a third option, meant to represent the reality in which he believed we already lived: protopia.

The concept, which Mr. Kelly debuted in his 2010 book, “What Technology Wants,” refers to a society that, rather than solving all its problems (as in a utopia) or falling into dire dysfunction (as in a dystopia), makes incremental progress over a long period of time — thanks to the ways in which technological advancement is enhancing the natural evolutionary process.

(The root of the word has many derivations, Mr. Kelly said. “Pro as in progress. As in progression. As in prototype, early. As in pro versus con, meaning yes versus no. Pro as in professional. All the positives of pro going forward.”)

“You can't see a difference of 1 percent unless you turn around and look behind you,” Mr. Kelly said. “One percent a year, for 100 years — that's a big difference.”

Protopia did not attract much attention when Mr. Kelly's book was first released. But it has started to gain traction among futurists in recent years as an alternative to the existing binary.

One failure of that binary: Many of these futurists will point out that, historically speaking, a utopia for some has meant dystopia for others. At a time of [rising anti-democratic sentiment across the world](#), advocates of the protopian concept believe it

offers a more realistic, more humane and potentially more inclusive pathway to a better future.

Even among its proponents, however, there are significant disagreements around what that future should look like.

Monika Bielskyte, 36, is founder of [Protopia Futures](#), a collective of thinkers exploring hopeful visions for the future. She is perhaps the highest profile adoptee of protopia — and she's adamant that Mr. Kelly's original vision comes up short.

Mr. Kelly believes protopian progress is a natural product of technology's acceleration. But for Ms. Bielskyte, the road to protopia must be rigorous and inclusive, particularly of marginalized people — including those working at the intersection of L.G.B.T.Q., Indigenous and disability justice. If successful, Ms. Bielskyte hopes, this vision will inspire people to create not a paradise, but at least a more equitable society than what we have now.

“If the problem is social, cultural, political, then the solution has to be social, cultural, political,” she said. “If humanity creates any particular problem, humanity needs to be the answer to the problem. Technology can be great, or it can be awful — it is not some magical panacea. It is always shaped by our biases.”

Ms. Bielskyte is not the only one carrying the protopian banner. Micha Narberhaus is the founder of [Protopia Lab](#), a nonprofit association based in Barcelona that works to promote different approaches to society's most urgent social and environmental problems. According to its website, protopia is an antidote to “us-verses-them activism.” It is also an “evolutionary search process instead of ideological dogmas,” Mr. Narberhaus said in a Twitter direct message.

And [Protopian Futures](#), a website run by Zev Paiss, a sustainability consultant, highlights already existing “viable solutions” to problems like food production, water treatment, green building and renewable energy.

“We need to figure out human-scale, human-centered, environmentally sustainable solutions that really make our world a better place for as many of us as possible,” Mr. Paiss said.

Ms. Bielskyte, a creative director by trade, focuses more on integrating protopian values into media. She works as a consultant with science fiction TV and film creators to help build future-based worlds. Before the director Ryan Coogler and the producer Nate Moore began working on “Black Panther: Wakanda Forever,” Ms. Bielskyte said, she met with the duo to discuss how to potentially integrate protopian values into the shaping of the fictional world of Wakanda where the movie is set.

Ms. Bielskyte also gives speeches at conferences across the world, including the keynote address at the [Ada Lovelace Festival 2022](#) in Berlin.

During the talk, she insisted that the metaverse, which she believes is grounded in dystopian fiction, needed to be reimagined with a greater emphasis on inclusivity and sustainability. She referred to a quote from the author bell hooks: “To be truly visionary, we have to root our imagination in our concrete reality while simultaneously imagining possibilities beyond that reality.”

Her perspective, she said, is informed by her life experience. She grew up in Lithuania when it was under the control of the former Soviet Union — a “living dystopia” — and her grandfather is a Holocaust survivor. A “descendant of multiple genocides,” Ms. Bielskyte said she has also encountered hurdles navigating the world as a queer, neurodivergent woman.

Mr. Kelly is glad that his concept has found new champions like Ms. Bielskyte. Responding to an email query about protopia, Mr. Kelly wrote back, “Protopia is me. How can I help?” But he’s far from territorial, even if he and Ms. Bielskyte see certain elements differently.

“That means it’s a living word,” he said. “People will try to expand it, modify it, make it theirs, and that’s good.”

Protopians are naturally focused on the future, but their past inevitably leads back to Mr. Kelly’s writing studio in Pacifica, Calif. — and that’s where Ms. Bielskyte found herself in May 2019, the day before she delivered the keynote at a [Design Is \[...\] conference](#). They had what Mr. Kelly described as a “brief” amicable conversation discussing protopia and the direction Ms. Bielskyte had taken it in.

Afterward, the futurists parted ways, each headed into their own, ideally protopian, futures.