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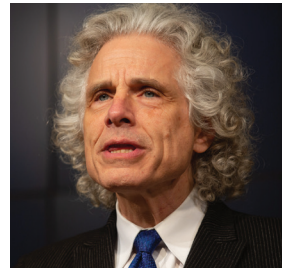
Cato's Letter

Progress vs. Utopia

STEVEN PINKER

I don't think of the case that I have made in my books as optimism so much as "factfulness," to use the pleasant term introduced by Hans Rosling. Namely, that there are just many facts about changes in the human condition over history that most people are unaware of.

Most people have no idea that extreme poverty has declined from 90 percent to 9 percent. They have no idea that there's been a reduction in the number of wars and deaths in wars. They don't know that the majority of people are literate, when that wasn't the case until fairly recently. I don't consider it optimistic to point this out. I just consider people's worldview to be incomplete if they don't know these things—and many people don't.



STEVEN PINKER is the Johnstone Family Professor of Psychology at Harvard University and the author of *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress*. In June, he spoke to Marian L. Tupy for HumanProgress.org's video series, *The Covid Tonic*.

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But awareness of these facts doesn't mean that bad things can never happen. Quite the contrary. An appreciation of progress comes from understanding our default condition, which is poor and ignorant and vulnerable to forces of nature. That's the reality of the universe. What progress consists of is using the special tools that evolved in our species—intelligence and sociality—to try to solve these problems. Once in a while, we do figure out how to solve them. When we're smart, we remember the solutions and we discard the failures.

We make progress a bit at a time by fighting against forces of nature that are always arrayed against us. The key is our ability to defeat our natural enemies by the application of reason.

There is in our cultural history a notion of progress as a force that magically lifts us. This notion was explicit in some theories in the 19th century—in the Hegelian dialectic and in Herbert Spencer's theory of evolution—an almost mystical force that propelled people upward. And I think that is still part of people's understanding of progress. Now, this is mystical. The

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universe contains no such force—quite the contrary. This idea of an uplifting force is a mistaken background assumption about what progress means and how it works.

There's also a kind of political motivation at stake in the denial of progress. Some people are opposed to the very system that is responsible for the gifts of progress—science and technology, trade and liberal democracy, and international organizations and other institutions. Without those drivers of progress, people have to resort to an outside cause for society's improvements, something apart from humans and institutions. It's almost as if some people's worst nightmare would be that things actually got better, because that scenario would vindicate the idea that, as flawed as our current arrangements are, they're a lot better than the alternative.

Certain ideologies are committed to a narrative of decline. There's a romantic green-ism that holds we used to live in harmony with nature until the Industrial Revolution. Science and technology despoiled a pristine environ-

ment and alienated us from nature, and things have gotten worse since then. Then there's the reactionary nationalism that America used to be great, but then it was corrupted by liberal elites. There are various nostalgic movements that presume there was a heroic Golden Age and since then we've become decadent, soft, consumerist, pacifist, and effeminate, unlike the great old days of heroes and manly men. This Nietzschean narrative is surprisingly popular among many intellectuals. So, there are a number of motives to deny progress.

Underlying this denial is the rejection of an historical approach where people compare the reality of today to the reality of the past; instead, people want

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to compare reality to their imagined utopia. A utopian vision can be dangerous because certain aspects of the human condition make a utopia impossible.

One thing to understand about progress is that it's not steady. It's a jagged line. It can be reversed and there can be setbacks. Important questions that I think have not received enough attention from historians are “What kinds of progress are reversible?” and “Which ones seem more or less permanent?” The rate of violent crime, for example, can go up or down. Americans are now living in a time when crime is at a relatively low level by American standards, yet the level is still higher than the rest of the industrialized West. Similar fluctuations appear in the number and deadliness of civil wars. Violent crime increased from the 1960s until the end of the Cold War, when there was a notable decline. But recently violent crime levels have started to go up again.

Some things show backsliding, such as violent crime, but others seem harder to turn back, like chattel slavery. Over several hundred years, society has gone from slavery being legal everywhere to illegal everywhere. Human trafficking survives, and that's a real problem. But we don't see a move toward countries reopening legal slave markets. It looks like that's a done deal. Or an even more dramatic example is human sacrifice, like throwing virgins into volcanoes. Now, it's not as if history says that those practices can never recur. The Bible is filled with warnings about this particular danger of backsliding, including Abraham almost sacrificing Isaac on divine orders. The Hebrews had put human sacrifice behind them because of all the warnings saying, “don't do this.” The temptation was still there, but it did disappear,

and now we don't see periodic clamoring to reintroduce it. Torture, executions, debtors' prisons, disenfranchisement of women—those crimes and wrongdoings seem to be a relatively reliable one-way ratchet in which, once society has overcome committing such crimes and abuses, there's not much in the way of backsliding.

The mechanism of that process remains unclear, but I would love to have more clarity on it. We need to ask whether some practices now might follow that trajectory. One of the most interesting practices would be interstate war—Country A declaring war on Country B—the armies of tanks meeting



on a battlefield, artillery pulverizing each other's cities, and warships engaging in big battles at sea. That seems to be on its way out. Civil wars persist, but there are very few interstate wars. Since it's such a stupid thing to do anyway, and the motives for doing it are becoming obsolete in a world that depends more on information and trade and less on land and resources, the disappearance of interstate war may be a

natural development. But we don't know. It is too soon to tell, but it would not be unprecedented if a barbaric human custom fell by the wayside.

There are constant prophecies of doom, and as a result we have recently misallocated our priorities. After 9/11, for example, the United States put massive amounts of money into measures that changed everyday life. In contrast, a pandemic is something that we know has the potential to kill lots of people. We saw it happen during the Spanish flu and more recently with the HIV/AIDS epidemic. But early this year we didn't have in place early-warning systems, the ability to ramp up production of antivirals and vaccines, or the civil organization for intelligent quarantining and tracing and testing. So, it isn't that we're not worried enough but that we're often worried about the wrong things. Getting better at risk assessment is another important kind of progress.

When we consider what drives progress, often it is disasters that lead people to take protective measures after the fact. In the United States in the 1930s and 1940s, horrific fires raged in movie theaters and nightclubs that would kill 150 people and dozens of firefighters at a time; there was a sense of crisis. With the 1973 publication of *America Burning*, the report by the President's Commission on Fire Prevention and Control, fire departments expanded along with

sprinkler systems; fire alarms; illuminated signs; and one-way, spring-loaded exit doors, all of which had a huge effect on fire safety. Fewer people died from fires. In fact, fire departments are putting themselves out of business because they're so successful at preventing fires from happening in the first place. They feed their dalmatians, but we don't begrudge their idleness. It's good that we have fire departments and that the firefighters sit around, and we probably ought to have something similar for pandemics given the huge damage that's been done economically and in loss of life.

It is critical not just to point out problems in our current society and time. There always will be problems. But what can we reasonably expect?

“ It is sobering to remind ourselves of the problems that other societies have faced. ”

How much better or worse is what we have now compared with other things that have actually existed on planet Earth, as opposed to what's in our imaginations, where anything is possible? In what ways is the current situation in our country better or worse than in other countries and at other times? It is sobering to remind ourselves of the problems that other societies have faced as we study their causes and how they were overcome.

Even during my lifetime—in the 1970s—we saw things like double-digit inflation while we had double-digit unemployment. We experienced lines around the block and all-day waits for gasoline; fears of shortages of heating oil and heating gas; and shortages of meat, coffee, and sugar—to say nothing of what life was like during the Great Depression and the two World Wars. Or compare different social systems, especially when we have an experimental group and a control group—like East and West Germany, North and South Korea, Chile and Venezuela—where we see the effects for people living under different systems and we are able to make comparisons across history. How well did people live? What did they die from? How many babies survived their first year? What did a typical person eat? All of those factors are essential in calibrating our sense of where we are, where we can go, what works, and what doesn't work. ■



CATO PROFILE

Scott Lincicome

Scott Lincicome is a senior fellow in economic studies at the Cato Institute. Prior to joining Cato, Scott spent two decades practicing international trade law at White & Case, LLP. He has a BA in political science from the University of Virginia and a JD from the university's School of Law.

How did you come to be interested in the law and the economics of trade, and what attracted you to make the switch to doing policy work full time with the Cato Institute?

It was all quite fortuitous. After I graduated from college in 1998, I interned with Cato's Center for Constitutional Studies. At the end of the internship, I was offered a job as a research assistant for the trade center. I spent the next three years learning about, and really enjoying, trade policy and law, so that became what I pursued when I left for law school in 2001.

In 2008, I was offered a position on trade policy for a presidential campaign. That experience really sparked my interest in politics and policy (especially economic policy), so I started blogging on trade and other policy issues in 2009 and wrote a couple of papers for Cato. Cato asked me to be an adjunct scholar a few years later, and I kept writing on policy in my ever-dwindling spare time. The move to being a full-time policy wonk was only natural. It let me devote myself to policy, avoid messy conflicts, and rebut the recent troubling and bipartisan rise of anti-market sentiment. So here I am.

What are some of the most common misconceptions about trade that you seek to correct?

One of the biggest misconceptions about trade is that it occurs between states, not individuals. Ninety-nine percent (if not more!) of all trade policy discussions in politics and media treat trade as if it's

two governments duking it out for some mythical prize, when in reality it is the result of millions of voluntary transactions between individuals who each see a benefit in engaging in that commerce. Politicians reject this framework because it allows Americans to more easily see protectionism for what it is: government restrictions on voluntary, cross-border commerce.

You are one of Cato's scholars with a more active presence and a sizable audience on social media. Do you find that helps with and informs your policy work?

Social media (for me, mainly Twitter) is a real blessing for my policy work, but it also requires real effort to keep it that way. At its best, Twitter is an invaluable way to collect and disseminate information—I honestly can't tell you the number of times someone there has notified me of an important new article/study, or provided real-time, on-the-ground information about a developing policy issue, or solicited an op-ed, interview, or other opportunity in response to something I've shared. The live discussions among top experts in various fields are also fascinating and enriching, and of course there's tons of great nonpolicy information and humor on there too. At the same time, Twitter and other social media can be distracting, frustrating, or worse, and thus require constant curation as well as constant effort not to let them distract from your "real-life" obligations and interactions. But if you follow those rules and just have fun, it's all pretty great. ■

A Voice for Liberty in Washington



“I wish everyone had a chance to spend some time in Washington and really see how the federal government works,” Jane Johnson said during a recent interview about her partnership with Cato. “It’s mostly about process, but then there are places like Cato that actually do policy.” In the late 1970s, Jane saw firsthand how Washington works while she was employed at the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare during reauthorization of the Higher Education Act. “Most Americans are totally unaware.”

Jane recently relocated to California, where she had lived in the 1960s and 1970s as a University of California, Berkeley, graduate student. Experiencing California’s subsequent fiscal decline only bolsters her passion for supporting sensible approaches to government. “When I was a student at Berkeley, California was a relatively well-run state, but now it’s a mess. Successful people are already leaving—and more will follow—because our system is rotten to the core.” The latest proposals for convoluted and harmful wealth taxes to fix the state’s fiscal crisis are yet another indication that policies in California are headed in the wrong direction.

In 2019, Jane was glad to learn about Cato’s Project on Poverty and Inequality in California, which is building relationships with state and local leaders to create real opportunities for low-income residents

after decades of failure by big-government approaches. Jane now provides dedicated support for this initiative through her retirement savings, using qualified charitable distributions that fulfill the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) rules for required minimum distributions (RMDs).

While she’s no fan of the IRS rules, Jane is happy to use her money to support nonprofits that share her values. “There are many people like me who planned ahead and fortunately don’t need to live off RMDs,” Jane said. “I’m so glad I found out about the qualified distributions for charities, and I believe everyone should know about them.”

Jane describes herself as having always been a “libertarian at heart.” And while she doesn’t always agree with everything Cato publishes, she’s proud to be a partner in Cato’s mission to advance freedom and prosperity.

We were so grateful when Jane confirmed that she named Cato as a beneficiary of her retirement accounts. One of the greatest honors for the Institute is when Sponsors work with us to build their legacies for liberty. As Cato tests new ways to reach large audiences of persuadable people, including through our project in California, Legacy Society Sponsors also strengthen our ability to plan. It means a lot to have Jane, someone who knows government and the influence our movement can have, as part of Cato’s Legacy Society. ■

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“Find out why, if you are not an optimist, you should be.”

—VERNON L. SMITH, *Nobel Prize-winning economist*



The world is, for the most part, getting better. While major concerns such as climate change, marine plastic pollution, and declining wildlife populations are still with us, many of these problems are already in the process of being ameliorated as a result of favorable economic, social, and technological trends. *Ten Global Trends Every Smart Person Should Know: And Many Others You Will Find Interesting* will provide busy people with beautifully illustrated, quick-to-read, easily understandable, and entertaining access to surprising facts that they need to know about how the world is really faring.



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