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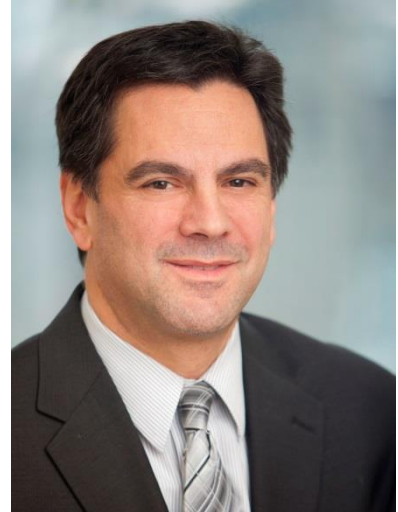
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The Best of All Possible Times

Paul D. Snitzer

psnitzer@prudentmanagement.com



The French philosopher Voltaire in his novella *Candide* created the character Dr. Pangloss, a tutor and mentor of the novella's hero, and had Dr. Pangloss famously argue throughout the book that, no matter what disasters occurred, the world we live in must be "the best of all possible worlds." Voltaire's intent was to mock the reasoning of a German philosopher, Gottfried Leibniz, who had struggled with the problem of evil by arguing that the world was perfect and that no true evil could exist in it. Since the publication of *Candide*, critics who view an opinion as overly optimistic typically will ridicule that opinion as "Panglossian."¹

Harvard professor and polymath Stephen Pinker accepts the challenge of having this epithet used against him in his new book, *Enlightenment Now, The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism and Progress* (2018). On the very first page of this entertaining and informative book, Pinker explains his thesis – not only is a "bleak assessment of the state of the world" wrong, such an assessment is "flat-earth wrong, couldn't be more wrong." His book is a screed, but a scholarly and thoroughly documented one, against pessimism, cynicism and nihilism. While Pinker does not argue that our world is "the best of all possible worlds" – in fact he fully rejects the proposition that the world cannot be made better – he does argue that now is the best time for humans to be alive since the onset of our species.

To make such an argument, Pinker must state by what measures he is evaluating life today against life at any time in the past, and he does not hesitate to do so. To Pinker, and indeed to any thoughtful person, circumstances today can be objectively evaluated against circumstances in the past if we agree that "health is better than sickness; life better than death; sustenance better than

¹ From the modern perspective Voltaire has scored a knock-out over Leibniz on the question of whether evil exists, but we should, before dismissing Leibniz with a sneer, remember that, among other things, Leibniz discovered calculus and published in 1703 an "Explanation of Binary Arithmetic, Which Uses Only the Characters 0 and 1", i.e., a binary logical number system, the basis of virtually all modern computing.

hunger and abundance is better than poverty, peace is better than war, safety better than danger, freedom better than tyranny, literacy better than illiteracy, knowledge better than ignorance, happiness better than misery, [and] stimulation better than drudgery.”

Using these values as his benchmarks, Pinker proceeds to argue, thoroughly, convincingly and with an abundance of statistical evidence displayed in every possible type of chart and graph, that in each of these measures of human well-being, the world “has made spectacular progress.”

Pinker devotes one chapter to each metric and proves as to each the spectacular progress which has been made. For example, worldwide life expectancy is now 71.4 years whereas “for most of human history” life expectancy was between 29-35 years. Moreover, poorer countries are experiencing faster growth in life expectancy, with startling results. Life expectancy in Kenya, for example, grew by almost ten years during the period from 2003 to 2013. Accordingly, the average Kenyan during this ten year period “had not lost a single year of their remaining lifetime” – everyone “got ten years older, yet death had not come a step closer.”

Through his avalanche of statistics, Pinker establishes the very recent monumental progress that has been made in each of the areas of human wellbeing he identifies. These include:

- **Sickness and health.** Epidemics used to kill millions, “wiping out entire civilizations” but the top 100 scientists alone have made discoveries that have saved at least 5 billion lives. Smallpox, for example, killed over 300 million people in the 20th century, and it has been eradicated. Since 1990, 100 million children have been saved by control of five of the most lethal infectious diseases – pneumonia, diarrhea, malaria, measles and HIV/AIDS.
- **Sustenance.** The world added 5 billion people after 1947, while simultaneously reducing hunger. Catastrophic famines have been eliminated in most of the world; chronic undernourishment is in decline and thanks to improvements in agricultural methods, all of this food is produced on less than 1/3 of the land that the world formerly used for agriculture.
- **Wealth.** By 2008 the world’s population had an average income equivalent to Western Europe in 1964. Extreme poverty is being eliminated and the world is becoming middle class. The number of extremely poor people has declined, although the total world population more than doubled between 1970 and 2015. Had they wished to do so, newspapers could have run this headline -- “Number of People in Extreme Poverty Fell by 137,000 Since Yesterday” - every day for the last 25 years.
- **Democracy.** Democracies have higher rates of economic growth, freer and healthier citizens, fewer wars and genocides and virtually no famines. In 2015 the world had 103 democracies, in 1971, just 31. Those 103 constitute 56% of the world’s population and of the people who live in non-democracies, 80% reside in China.
- **Peace.** The number of war deaths underwent “a vertiginous six-decade plunge” after World War II, a period during which no major war between the great powers occurred, and all three measures of war – frequency, duration, and lethality – “declined in tandem,” leading to a “period that has been called the Long Peace.”
- **Safety.** Homicide rates, traffic and other accidental deaths and injuries have dramatically declined, sparing millions of lives and reducing “suffering on a massive scale.”

Pinker's breadth of knowledge also allows him to address hot-button issues that are not solely resolvable through quantitative and statistical analysis, including income inequality, climate change, nuclear proliferation and terrorism. And yes, on each of these topics he sees, and argues persuasively, for a more optimistic view.

For example, on income inequality, Pinker begins with a defensible value judgment: income inequality is "not a fundamental component of well-being" such as health, knowledge or peace. If a "person lives a long, healthy, pleasurable and stimulating life, then how much money the Joneses earn" is "morally irrelevant." The true moral issue, Pinker writes, is not whether everyone has the same, but whether each have enough. Furthermore, an increase in inequality is not necessarily bad: as societies escape from universal poverty, they are bound to become more unequal. "Nor is a decrease in inequality always good: most effective levelers of economic disparity are wars, epidemics, violent revolutions and state collapse."

Pinker next addresses the data. As countries get richer they get less equal, because "some people leave farming for higher-paying lines of work," but as "more of the population gets swept into the modern economy, inequality should decline." And using complex statistical measures (the "international Gini coefficient") Pinker shows that in fact "poor countries are getting richer faster than rich countries are getting richer," i.e., "inequality in the world is declining."

It is true that within the United States and Great Britain there has been a rise in inequality statistics since 1980, but the importance of this increase is ameliorated by four facts. First, one of the reasons the middle class is getting smaller, is "because so many Americans are becoming affluent." Between 1979 and 2014, the percentage of poor Americans dropped by four percent and the percentage of lower middle class by seven percent, while the upper middle class grew by 27%. Second, longitudinal data, as opposed to static data, shows that people move in and out of income brackets as they age, so that "half of Americans will find themselves among the top tenth of income earners" at least once during their working lives. Third, measurements of income inequality often ignore redistributions (unemployment insurance, disability payments, Medicaid). These wealth transfers substantially boost the incomes of the nonrich. Finally, when poverty is defined in terms of what people consume rather than what they earn, "we find that the American poverty rate has declined by ninety percent since 1960," to just 3 percent of the population.

Although Pinker's viewpoint is unusual – a fact that he attributes to a psychological tendency to equate pessimism with moral seriousness and optimism with superficiality or salesmanship – other authors have taken up the same mantle. Recently the journalist Gregg Easterbrook published *It's Better Than It Looks, Reasons for Optimism in an Age of Fear*. Easterbrook covers some of the same territory as Pinker, but adds his own unique and valuable insights. For example, while Pinker documents the recent great decline in war, and the great increase in agricultural production over the past 100+ years, Easterbrook connects these two occurrences: "one reason for the striking decline of war during the last quarter-century has been that nations no longer need to seize land to obtain sufficient food."

Like these authors, PMA's underlying philosophy is based on a type of optimism, a belief that the conditions that have allowed for these miraculous developments to occur will continue to exist and will, in the long run, lead to further wealth creation and advancements in human life. In agreement with these views is another renowned investor -- Warren Buffett -- who wrote in early 2018 that the American "game of economic miracles is in its early innings" and that "most American children are going to live far better than their parents did."