

Opinions

We have a bleak view of modern life. But the world is making real progress.

By Fareed Zakaria

This year's [World Economic Forum](#), more than usual, prompted a spirited round of elite-bashing, which has now become the trendy political posture on both the right and left. On one side, President Trump and Fox News hosts slam the out-of-touch establishment that, according to them, has run things into the ground. On the other side, left-wingers decry the millionaires and billionaires who, [in one author's phrase](#), "broke the modern world."

Underlying these twin critiques is a bleak view of modern life — seen as a dysfunctional global order, producing stagnant incomes, rising insecurity and environmental degradation. But is this depiction, in fact, true? Are we doing so very badly that we need to bring back the guillotines?

On the simplest and most important measure, income, the story is actually one of astonishing progress. Since 1990, more than 1 billion people have moved out of extreme poverty. The share of the global population living in these dire conditions has gone from 36 percent to 10 percent, the [lowest in recorded history](#). This is, as the World Bank president, Jim Yong Kim, [notes](#), "one of the greatest achievements of our time." Inequality, from a global perspective, has [declined dramatically](#).

And all this has happened chiefly because countries — from China to India to Ethiopia — have adopted more market-friendly policies, and Western countries have helped them with access to markets, humanitarian assistance and loan forgiveness. In other words, policies supported by these very elites.

Look at any measure from a global perspective and the numbers are staggering. The [child mortality rate](#) is down 58 percent since 1990. [Undernourishment](#) has fallen 41 percent, and [maternal deaths](#) (women dying because of childbirth) have dropped by 43 percent over roughly the same period.

I know the response that some will have to these statistics. The figures pertain to the world in general, not the United States. Things might have improved for the Chinese, but not for the denizens of rich countries. That sense of "unfairness" is what is surely fueling Trump's "America First" agenda and much of the anger on the right at the international system. (More bewilderingly, the left, traditionally concerned about the poorest of the poor, has become critical of a process that has improved the lives of at least 1 billion of the world's most impoverished people.)

When criticizing the current state of affairs, it's easy to hark back to some nostalgic old order, the modern world before the current elites "broke" it. But when was that golden age? In the 1950s, when Jim Crow reigned in the United States and women could barely work as anything more than seamstresses and secretaries? The

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1980s, when two-thirds of the globe stagnated under state socialism, repression and isolation? What group of elites — kings, commissars, mandarins — ran the world better than our current hodgepodge of politicians and business executives?

Even in the West, it is easy to take for granted the astounding progress. We live longer, the air and water are cleaner, crime has plunged, and information and communication are virtually free. Economically, there have been gains, though crucially, they have not been distributed equally.

But there have been monumental improvements in access and opportunity for large segments of the population that were locked out and pushed down. In the United States, the gap between black and white high school completion [has almost disappeared](#). The poverty gap between blacks and whites has shrunk (but remains [distressingly large](#)). Hispanic college enrollment [has soared](#). The gender gap between wages for men and women [has narrowed](#). The number of [female chief executives](#) at Fortune 500 companies has gone from one to 24 over the past 20 years. Female membership in national legislatures of Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development member countries [has almost doubled](#) in the same period. [No countries allowed](#) same-sex marriage two decades ago, but more than 20 countries do today. In all these areas, much remains to be done. But in each of them, there has been striking progress.

I understand that important segments of the Western working class are under great pressure, and that they often feel ignored and left behind by this progress. We must find ways to give them greater economic support and moral dignity. But extensive research shows that some of their discomfort comes from watching a society in which these other groups are rising, changing the nature of the world in which they'd enjoyed [a comfortable status](#).

After 400 years of slavery, segregation and discrimination in the United States, blacks have been moving up. After thousands of years of being treated as structurally subordinate, women are now gaining genuine equality. Once considered criminals or deviants, gays can finally live and love freely in many countries. The fact that these changes might cause discomfort to some is not a reason to pause, nor to forget that it represents deep and lasting human progress that we should celebrate.

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