

The Washington Times

The inevitability of human ingenuity

Optimism continues to flower in the dark crevices of human conduct

June 6, 2016

A cursory scan of the news suggests that the breadth and depth of troubles that bedevil humanity worsens with the passage of time. It's hard not to be discouraged by the "wars and rumors of wars" that the Bible says will be with us always. But gloomy headlines don't tell the whole story. The human condition has improved over time, even if it doesn't attract much attention. It's cause for celebration, or at least an occasional attitude of gratitude.

The Human Progress Project, an initiative of the Cato Institute, has compiled a body of data to crystallize the steps civilization has taken along the road from the swamp and the cave. Most compelling is the view of the state of income distribution. The Economist magazine has declared 2016 to be the year the planet's richest 1 percent achieved more wealth than the remaining 99 percent — presumably a sign that the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. In fact, according to the Human Progress Project, the poor are getting richer, too: "Despite population growth, there are fewer people living in extreme poverty today than ever before."

That's because the economic pie is not static but growing, and rapidly. A graph of world gross domestic product in 1990 dollars shows a line nearly flat, extending from zero A.D. to the year 1800, then it goes up almost vertically, reaching \$50 trillion by 2000. It is only a brief snapshot of the present that provides ammunition (but mostly blanks) for the socialist view that a few are getting more than their fair share. A longer-range view demonstrates that most of the planet's 7 billion inhabitants are benefiting from the explosion of productivity in the modern age. "This is why many of us, if given the choice, would choose to be an ordinary person today instead of a member of the upper crust a century ago or a 17th century king," writes Chelsea German of Cato. Trickle down works after all.

Climbing productivity is responsible for the fact that while the human population has grown by 143 percent since 1960, per capita income has risen by 163 percent. Ten of 15 categories of essential commodities, such as food and drink, have become less expensive during that period. While doomsayers have long warned that overpopulation would lead to worldwide starvation and other forms of deprivation, the opposite has come to pass. There is more abundance than ever, proving the economist Julian Simon's classic argument that human ingenuity is "the ultimate resource."

To be sure, there are still injustices that jar the contemporary conscience. For example, there are nearly 46 million men and women still living in slavery, according to the Australia-based Walk Free Foundation. That figure includes those in "situations of exploitation that a person cannot refuse or leave because of threats, violence, coercion, abuse of power or deception." Sixty

percent of those trapped in slavery are in Asia, with 18.3 million in India alone. North Korea enslaves 4.3 percent of its people, the largest proportion of all. While the United States and Russia have largely suspended their nuclear arms race, Iran, North Korea and perhaps others are determined to seize the nuclear baton and wave it at their neighbors.

The past is no guarantee of the future, of course, as money managers remind us, but halfway through 2016 it's nevertheless cheering to remember that there's never been a better time to be alive.