

Reynolds: We just entered into a golden age of space exploration. Why all the pessimism?

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One of my friends recently commented that while everyone is yammering about politics, we're actually entering into a golden age beyond the wildest dreams of prior generations. And you know, I think that's right.

I was thinking of this as I was reading Joe Pappalardo's new book on space, "Spaceport Earth: The Reinvention of Spaceflight." After the rapid progress of the Apollo/Space Race years, things kind of stagnated for several decades. Oh, sure, we had the Space Shuttle, but it just went up and down, and the International Space Station, but it just went around and around. We're going on 50 years since a human being traveled beyond low earth orbit.

But now, as Pappalardo reports, that's changing. As he travels the world from Russia, to the Ariane launch site in French Guiana where he hung out with rocket scientists and the French Foreign Legion troops who guard the site, to Cape Canaveral and Vandenberg and White Sands, and the nuclei of progress at Mojave, California and Waco Texas, Pappalardo notes a whole new kind of energy.

Thanks in part to infusions of capital and energy from tycoons like Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos, private rocket companies are doing things that only governments previously did, and they're doing them faster and better. (Pappalardo took a picture of a novel stage-coupling device belonging to SpaceX and had to delete it because it violated U.S. export regulations, since rockets and satellites are treated as "munitions." The feds don't want other countries catching on.)

Bezos' company, Blue Origin, has already flown a manned space capsule, though on its first test flight it was manned only by a dummy named Mannequin Skywalker. But the dummy survived intact, and people will be next. Likewise, SpaceX's manned Dragon capsule is scheduled to fly this year, and old-line aerospace giant Boeing's new capsule, the CST-100 Starliner, is scheduled to fly this year as well.

So we're moving back into space in a big way, and not on the old one-shot Apollo model, which was impressive but ultimately unsustainable. And that's not the only way things are improving.

In fact, almost everything is improving but our attitudes. As Marian Tupy writes:

"Over the last 200 years or so, the world has experienced previously unimaginable improvements in standards of living. The process of rapid economic growth started in Europe and America, but today some of the world's fastest growing countries can be found in Asia and Africa — lifting billions of people from absolute poverty. Historical evidence, therefore, makes a potent case for optimism. Yet, pessimism is everywhere."

In 1980, more than half the world lived in extreme poverty. Now, thanks to the spread of free markets, that number has been slashed to less than a quarter, and if current trends continue it will be down 5 percent by 2030, only a little over a decade from now.

What Nobel laureate Robert Fogel calls the "escape from hunger and premature death" has come a long way. Diseases are being cured, people with disabilities are getting prosthetic limbs, and even prosthetic eyes and ears. People in third world countries have smartphones now that connect them to the world, where a couple of decades ago they might have had to walk miles to make a telephone call.

So as you find yourself getting angry on social media, or yelling at the TV news, you might want to take a step back and reflect on the larger trends. In a few hundred years, people will remember our era for these great changes, rather than what someone said on Twitter. And they'll probably wonder why people today seemed so upset.