

Professor laments birth of daughter in ‘doomed world’

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Last week, the *New York Times* ran an opinion piece by Roy Scranton, an English professor at the University of Notre Dame in the US, and the author of the cheerfully titled book, *We’re Doomed. Now What? Essays on War and Climate Change*.

You see, Scranton and his partner have just had a girl. I’ll let him explain his pitiful tale of woe:

“I cried two times when my daughter was born. First for joy, when after 27 hours of labour the little feral being we’d made came yowling into the world, and the second for sorrow, holding the earth’s newest human and looking out the window with her at the rows of cars in the hospital parking lot, the strip mall across the street, the box stores and drive-throughs and drainage ditches and asphalt and waste fields that had once been oak groves. A world of extinction and catastrophe, a world in which harmony with nature had long been foreclosed. My partner and I had, in our selfishness, doomed our daughter to life on a dystopian planet, and I could see no way to shield her from the future.”

He continues, bemoaning the inevitability of “a global catastrophe whose full implications any reasonable person must turn away from in horror”.

He muses lugubriously about an alleged emerging trend among young people to have fewer children because of climate change, the injunction by academics to teach children to have fewer children themselves, and the death by self-immolation of David S. Buckel. A prominent gay rights lawyer, Buckel wrote in a suicide note sent to the *New York Times*:

“Pollution ravages our planet, oozing inhabatability via air, soil, water and weather. Most humans on the planet now breathe air made unhealthy by fossil fuels, and many die early deaths as a result — my early death by fossil fuel reflects what we are doing to ourselves.

To deal with climate change, we need a “revolutionary socio-economic transformation”, Scranton argues, and “waiting even five years may see the window for saving humanity shut”.

This transformation “would demand centralised control of key economic sectors, enormous state investment in carbon capture and sequestration and global co-ordination on a scale never before seen.”

Luckily, Scranton does not believe this nightmare scenario of Soviet-style central planning to be feasible.

“The very idea of unified national political action toward a single goal seems farcical, and unified action on a global scale mere whimsy.”

As awful as it probably will be for Scranton’s daughter to grow up with such a morose and dispirited father, we should perhaps not judge him too harshly. Mental health issues resulting from anxiety over problems such as climate change are real.

According to [a research report](#) by the American Psychological Association and ecoAmerica:

“Worry about actual or potential impacts of climate change can lead to stress that can build over time and eventually lead to stress-related problems, such as substance abuse, anxiety disorders and depression.”

Perhaps Scranton needs treatment, instead of sympathy or condemnation.

Fear of the future is a very common affliction, and it has been so throughout human history. Prophets of doom are well-documented in ancient texts.

In my [first column this year](#), I quoted British historian Thomas Babington Macaulay, who in 1830 wrote:

“We cannot absolutely prove that those are in error who tell us that society has reached a turning point, that we have seen our best days. But so said all before us, and with just as much apparent reason . . . On what principle is it that, when we see nothing but improvement behind us, we are to expect nothing but deterioration before us?”

To be sure, humanity – and the environment – faces problems. It always has, and always will. But there is insufficient reason to believe that those problems are intractable, or that they will ultimately ring our doom.

Take pollution, for example. From its peak around 1980, global air pollution has declined by 35%. Once we realise we have a significant problem, and when we have the prosperity to do so, humanity is perfectly capable of changing the tide.

In China, which has recently had much more cause for concern about air pollution than the developed countries of Europe and America, there are [sweeping plans](#) in place to address air pollution, and [improvements are already visible](#). It might please Scranton that better air quality in China is already [harming the business](#) of corporations that profit from air pollution.

[Heavy metal pollution](#) in the Hudson-Raritan river basin rose between 1880 and 1945, and fluctuated until they peaked in the late 1960s. Since 1970, however, both emissions and river loadings of cadmium, copper, lead and mercury all decreased. Similar stories of turning the tide against pollution are common in wealthy, developed countries.

Plastic pollution is a popular topic right now, but there is little evidence that it poses a serious environmental threat. As I pointed out in [a column a few weeks ago](#), a [2017 paper](#) assessing the

risks of plastic debris found that the “the actual environmental risks of different plastics and their associated chemicals remain largely unknown”. Another [journal article](#), by a professor of ecosystems research, concludes that the risk of micro-plastic pollution is “minor and questionable”.

To be concerned about pollution is perfectly justifiable. There are pollution problems that we have yet to solve. To want to do something about it is equally right. But history shows that humanity can and does address its pollution problems, and that nature is more resilient than we might think. To be terrified to the point of despair, as Scranton appears to be, is simply not defensible.

Scranton is also very afraid of war. So he should be, since war is a terrible thing. However, since the end of World War II, the world has become progressively less violent. The last 30 years in particular have been remarkably peaceful.

There are strong inverse correlations between war on one hand, and trade, prosperity and democracy on the other. Democratic states are less likely to go to war with each other. Prosperous nations are less likely to descend into civil war. Countries that trade with each other are less likely to go to war. And since all of those factors are on the rise, it is reasonable to suppose that war will continue to decrease, as it has since 1945.

It is arguable that we live in the most peaceful age in human history. Believing that we’ll be doomed by war, whatever the potential future causes for war, is simply not supported by the historical evidence.

Scranton evokes the “pastoral harmony” of children’s books, despairing that they are lost to us forever. But this is simply a myth. There never was an era of pastoral bliss. Life in the past was nasty, brutish and short.

We live in the most prosperous time in human history. I could continue posting charts, but links will have to do. We have [less poverty](#), [better nutrition](#), [longer lifespans](#), and a [lower infectious disease burden](#) than ever before. If we now appear to have problems with non-communicable diseases, it’s only because we no longer die at 30 of preventable diseases, and live long enough to die of degenerative or chronic conditions like cancer, diabetes, stroke and heart disease.

People in developed countries [work less than ever before](#). This is exactly what Marx wanted, as Marian L. Tupy, the editor of the excellent resource [HumanProgress.org](#) and a senior policy analyst at the Center for Global Liberty and Prosperity at the Cato Institute, points out.

Food prices are [at an historic low](#). Food provision is improving [in all regions of the world](#). The share of undernourished people is [declining almost everywhere](#). Famines have become rare, and most 20th-century famines were [attributable to communist central planning](#) anyway, which makes a mockery of Scranton’s call for “centralised control of key economic sectors”.

World population growth [peaked in the late 1960s](#), and has fallen by almost half since then. The population itself [will likely peak before 2100](#), as a result of better education, higher prosperity and more personal freedom, especially for women.

While food provision has increased despite the growth in human population, the use of arable land per capita has decreased. In fact, we may have already passed “peak farmland”, the point at which our use of agricultural land begins to decrease.

Scranton decries the urban environment in which his daughter was born, not realising that urbanisation is associated with liberation from serfdom, economic growth, and environmental improvement. As more and more people live in cities, argues Tupy, both people and planet flourish.

As a consequence of lower agricultural demand on land and fewer people living in the country, wildlife is returning to the most highly developed and built-up region of the world, Europe. Scranton’s dream of pastoral bliss may yet be realised.

Of course, the biggest bogeyman in Scranton’s depressing world view is climate change. Certainly, we will face challenges due to climate change, and believing that we have substantial power to prevent climate change is probably naïve. But the idea that climate change is bound to be catastrophic is based on little more than educated speculation. These prognostications rely on simplified computer models of some elements of the Earth’s highly complex climate system. They are notoriously incomplete and unreliable. They also fail to take into account humanity’s ability to adapt to varying climate conditions.

Moreover, although we’re often warned of the risks of a warmer world, we are rarely reminded of the benefits. Warmer climates have made it possible to farm at higher latitudes, for example. During the Little Ice Age of 1500 to 1850, Europe struggled terribly.

“The Little Ice Age is best known for its effects in Europe and the North Atlantic region,” says *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. “Alpine glaciers advanced far below their previous (and present) limits, obliterating farms, churches, and villages in Switzerland, France, and elsewhere. Frequent cold winters and cool, wet summers led to crop failures and famines over much of northern and central Europe. In addition, the North Atlantic cod fisheries declined as ocean temperatures fell in the 17th century.”

Today, as a result of warmer temperatures and higher levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, the planet is getting greener.

In the US, between 2006 and 2010, 31% of weather-related deaths were attributed to excessive heat. However, 63% – more than twice as many people – died of excessive cold. In many ways, a slightly warmer world might not be as bad as we are made to believe.

Only 6% of weather-related deaths during this period were attributable to extreme weather events like floods and storms. In fact, extreme weather is not getting worse, despite the alarmist predictions of scientists and the news media. The only measure by which they are increasing is in total value destroyed, but that is entirely attributable to greater value being placed in harm’s way.

It is also important to note that prosperity is an important bulwark against natural disasters. Such events routinely claim orders of magnitude more lives in poor countries than they do in the rich

world. If you're worried about extreme weather, the answer is not despair. It is not to build or live in high-risk areas, and economic policies that foster growth.

The world has its share of problems, as it has always had. However, the bleak picture Scranton paints is entirely unjustified, as is his self-professed sorrow at fathering a child. He describes himself as selfish for having a child, but is happy to wallow narcissistically in melancholy and self-pity.

By almost every measure, the lot of humanity is improving. I pity Scranton's daughter, and students. They would do well not to take his pathological pessimism and unhappiness to heart, and instead read a little more widely.

History teaches us not to despair, but to be optimistic about humanity's ability to adapt and prosper in a changing and often scary world.