

## Winning The War On Poverty

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One surprisingly enjoyable aspect of the annual Emancipendence celebration is that it invites everyone to pull back and take a more balanced view about our nation's progress and prospects. That's an important and welcome break from the sometimes feverish focus on problems.

The trouble is that if you get caught up in the weeds all the time, day in and day out, you will lose perspective. You will find yourself worrying about that nice lady stuck with fighting off feral cockroaches on a JUTC bus while she's choking on toxic fumes from the latest dump fire. Or you might consider the man who is told that there is no hospital bed for him at the Sav-la-Mar Hospital because Cornwall Regional Hospital has its own choking mechanisms.

Or you might get choked up on how the beaches are themselves choking with garbage and plastic. Or how about just choking on the fumes still coming from the energy ministry? Worse yet, you might find yourself choking back a laugh at the Government's attempt to distract people with rubbish about freeing women to wear sleeveless garments (something that should be done) while the dollar 'wining does never stop' and eats up the small increases public-sector workers were forced to take in celebration of '1.5'!

So there you see, it is very easy to get distracted by the cares of the day and the burning topics of the moment. But that's not a completely balanced perspective.

Enough of the choking! Actually, the topic I want to hit today is that, all things considered, humanity is doing pretty well. It's a topic I've touched on before, and it's one of my favourites. Fact is, humanity is doing pretty damn great, even though if you ask people about it, they think otherwise.

### Why Is That?

It's something of a paradox that even though the conditions of people's lives have been steadily improving, people are quite down about it. Nowadays, people tend to underestimate the global improvements, and very often it's even worse, and they think things are moving in the wrong direction. In fact, people get very passionate about it.

I want to pause on this point for a minute, because when I make this point in conversation it can elicit some very negative reactions. I am now convinced that there are many people who actually have an emotional need to believe that things are worse now than they've ever been, or, alternatively, think that if you concede that conditions for most human beings have been improving dramatically, it will somehow dampen enthusiasm or effort for continued progress.

Perhaps there's something to that worry, but personally, I haven't found that pessimism is a great motivator.

The disconnect is attributable to many causes, my favourite of which is that human beings are ceaselessly socially competitive. Therefore, a man's assessment of his needs and whether or not he is doing well is based mostly on how he thinks his neighbour is doing. That's basically why a millionaire in Hollywood will kill himself because he's all too painfully aware that the guy living in the bigger mansion down the road earns so much more than he does, and has achieved more notoriety.

Then there's the more mundane and less exciting explanations, which include that people pay more attention to bad news than to good news. Further, we look at spectacles, crashes and tragedies, not processes and large-scale movements. Thus we pass ten thousand cars without giving thought to the fact they're all moving along safely, but stop to gawk at the one that has had a crash. It's human nature. So we notice the earthquakes, floods, and wars, but we don't notice that overall, more people are living healthier, happier, and more secure lives than ever before. We naturally follow headlines, not trend lines.

But the facts are stubborn: Global improvements have been staggeringly positive, so much so that the end of absolute poverty is an achievable goal within most of our lifetimes. This would be a tremendous achievement for humanity.

## **NATURAL CONDITION**

Remember that, despite the nonsense propaganda you will come across in movies and other fairy tales about hunter-gatherer people happily picking berries and living lives of ease, extreme poverty is the natural condition of mankind. However, we have overcome it with ingenuity and social cooperation.

For most of human history, life pretty much sucked for most people. In fact, just back in 1800, a full 85 per cent of human beings lived in desperate poverty. By 1990, it was still at 43 per cent. But by 2011, it had fallen precipitously to 21 per cent.

The positive trend has continued: Today, only 12 per cent of the world's population live in extreme poverty. If you want an uplifting graphic portrayal of the trend, just Google 'world poverty clock' (<http://worldpoverty.io/>) and enjoy the show.

Of course, when we speak of 'poverty', we mean to capture not just the money jingling in a man's pocket, but a host of other connected miseries that we are all anxious to escape and see our families avoid. Marian Tupy of the Cato Institute puts it thus:

"Despite what we hear on the news and from many authorities, the great story of our era is that we are witnessing the greatest improvement in global living standards ever to take place. Poverty, malnutrition, illiteracy, child labour and infant mortality are falling faster than at any other time in human history. Life expectancy at birth has increased more than twice as much in the last century as it did in the previous 200,000 years.

"The risk that any individual will be exposed to war, die in a natural disaster, or be subject to dictatorship has become smaller than in any other epoch. A child born today is more likely to reach retirement age than his forbears were to live to their fifth birthday."

Now it's not all one way. As portions of the world's population escape poverty, unfortunately others may slip into poverty. The key, it seems to me, is to carefully study when and how masses of people have come to escape poverty's bondage, and to copy those going in the right direction. This might be an area where we don't have to, as they say, reinvent the wheel.