

# Our new, happy life? The ideology of development, by Charles Eisenstein - Ecologise



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People in older cultures, connected to community and place, held close in a lineage of ancestors, woven into a web of personal and cultural stories, radiate a kind of solidity and presence that I rarely find in any modern person. Whatever the measurable gains of the Ascent of Humanity, we have lost something immeasurably precious.

[Charles Eisenstein, Tikkun.org](#)

In George Orwell's *1984*, there is a moment when the Party announces an "increase" in the chocolate ration – from thirty grams to twenty. No one except for the protagonist, Winston, seems to notice that the ration has gone down not up.

'Comrades!' cried an eager youthful voice. 'Attention, comrades! We have glorious news for you. We have won the battle for production! Returns now completed of the output of all classes of consumption goods show that the standard of living has risen by no less than 20 per cent over the past year. All over Oceania this morning there were irrepressible spontaneous demonstrations when workers marched out of factories and offices and paraded through the streets with banners voicing their gratitude to Big Brother for the new, happy life which his wise leadership has bestowed upon us.

The newscaster goes on to announce one statistic after another proving that everything is getting

better. The phrase in vogue is “our new, happy life.” Of course, as with the chocolate ration, it is obvious that the statistics are phony.

Those words, “our new, happy life,” came to me as I read two recent articles, [one by Nicholas Kristof](#) in the New York Times and [the other](#) by Stephen Pinker in the Wall Street Journal, both of which asserted, with ample statistics, that the overall state of humanity is better now than at any time in history. Fewer people die in wars, car crashes, airplane crashes, even from gun violence. Poverty rates are lower than ever recorded, life expectancy is higher, and more people than ever are literate, have access to electricity and running water, and live in democracies.

Like in 1984, these articles affirm and celebrate the basic direction of society. We are headed in the right direction. With smug assurance they tell us that thanks to reason, science, and enlightened Western political thinking, we are making strides toward a better world.

Like in 1984, there is something deceptive in these arguments that so baldly serve the established order.

Unlike in 1984, the deception is not a product of phony statistics.

Before I describe the deception and what lies on the other side of it, I want to assure the reader that this essay will not try to prove that things are getting worse and worse. In fact, I share the fundamental optimism of Kristof and Pinker that humanity is walking a positive evolutionary path. For this evolution to proceed, however, it is necessary that we acknowledge and integrate the horror, the suffering, and the loss that the triumphalist narrative of civilizational progress skips over.

### **What hides behind the numbers**

In other words, we need to come to grips with precisely the things that Stephen Pinker’s statistics leave out. Generally speaking, metrics-based evaluations, while seemingly objective, bear the covert biases of those who decide what to measure, how to measure it, and what not to measure. They also devalue those things which we cannot measure or that are intrinsically unmeasurable. Let me offer a few examples.

Nicholas Kristof celebrates a decline in the number of people living on less than two dollars a day. What might that statistic hide? Well, every time an indigenous hunter-gatherer or traditional villager is forced off the land and goes to work on a plantation or sweatshop, his or her cash income increases from zero to several dollars a day. The numbers look good. GDP goes up. And the accompanying degradation is invisible.

For the last several decades, multitudes have fled the countryside for burgeoning cities in the global South. Most had lived largely outside the money economy. In a small village in India or Africa, most people procured food, built dwellings, made clothes, and created entertainment in a subsistence or gift economy, without much need for money. When development policies and the global economy push entire nations to generate foreign exchange to meet debt obligations, urbanization invariably results. In a slum in Lagos or Kolkata, two dollars a day is misery, where in the traditional village it might be affluence. Taking for granted the trend of development and urbanization, yes, it is a good thing when those slum dwellers rise from two dollars a day to, say, five. But the focus on that metric obscures deeper processes.

Kristof asserts that 2017 was the best year ever for human health. If we measure the prevalence of infectious diseases, he is certainly right. Life expectancy also continues to rise globally (though it is leveling off and in some countries, such as the United States, beginning to fall). Again though, these metrics obscure disturbing trends. A host of new diseases such as autoimmunity, allergies, Lyme, and autism, compounded with unprecedented levels of addiction, depression, and obesity,

contribute to declining physical vitality throughout the developed world, and increasingly in developing countries too. Vast social resources – one-fifth of GDP in the US – go toward sick care; society as a whole is unwell.

Both authors also mention literacy. What might the statistics hide here? For one, the transition into literacy has meant, in many places, the destruction of oral traditions and even the extinction of entire non-written languages. Literacy is part of a broader social repatterning, a transition into modernity, that accompanies cultural and linguistic homogenization. Tens of millions of children go to school to learn reading, writing, and arithmetic; history, science, and Shakespeare, in places where, a generation before, they would have learned how to herd goats, grow barley, make bricks, weave cloth, conduct ceremonies, or bake bread. They would have learned the uses of a thousand plants and the songs of a hundred birds, the words of a thousand stories and the steps to a hundred dances. Acculturation to literate society is part of a much larger change. Reasonable people may differ on whether this change is good or bad, on whether we are better off relying on digital social networks than on place-based communities, better off recognizing more corporate logos than local plants and animals, better off manipulating symbols rather than handling soil. Only from a prejudiced mindset could we say, though, that this shift represents unequivocal progress.

My intention here is not to use written words to decry literacy, deliciously ironic though that would be. I am merely observing that our metrics for progress encode hidden biases and neglect what won't fit comfortably into the worldview of those who devise them. Certainly, in a society that is already modernized, illiteracy is a terrible disadvantage, but outside that context it is not clear that a literate society – or its extension, a digitized society – is a happy society.

### **The immeasurability of happiness**

Biases or no, surely you can't argue with the happiness metrics that are the lynchpin of Pinker's argument that science, reason, and Western political ideals are working to create a better world. The more advanced the country, he says, the happier people are. Therefore the more the rest of the world develops along the path we blazed, the happier the world will be.

Unfortunately, happiness statistics encode as assumptions the very conclusions the developmentalist argument tries to prove. Generally speaking, happiness metrics comprise two approaches: objective measures of well-being, and subjective reports of happiness. Well-being metrics include such things as per-capita income, life expectancy, leisure time, educational level, access to health care, and many of the other accouterments of development. In many cultures, for example, "leisure" was not a concept; leisure in contradistinction to work assumes that work itself is as it became in the Industrial Revolution: tedious, degrading, burdensome. A culture where work is not clearly separable from life is misjudged by this happiness metric; see Helena Norberg-Hodge's marvelous film *Ancient Futures* for a depiction of such a culture, in which, as the film says, "work and leisure are one."

Encoded in objective well-being metrics is a certain vision of development; specifically, the mode of development that dominates today. To say that developed countries are therefore happier is circular logic.

As for subjective reports of individual happiness, individual self-reporting necessarily references the surrounding culture. I rate my happiness in comparison to the normative level of happiness around me. A society of rampant anxiety and depression draws a very low baseline. A woman told me once, "I used to consider myself to be a reasonably happy person, until I visited a village in Afghanistan near where I'd been deployed in the military. I wanted to see what it was like from a different perspective. This is a desperately poor village," she said. "The huts didn't even have floors, just dirt which frequently turned to mud. They barely even had enough food. But I have

never seen happier people. They were so full of joy and generosity. These people, who had nothing, were happier than almost anyone I know.”

Whatever those Afghan villagers had to make them happy, I don't think shows up in Stephen Pinker's statistics purporting to prove that they should follow our path. The reader may have had similar experiences visiting Mexico, Brazil, Africa, or India, in whose backwaters one finds a level of joy rare amidst the suburban boxes of my country. This, despite centuries of imperialism, war, and colonialism. Imagine the happiness that would be possible in a just and peaceful world.

I'm sure my point here will be unpersuasive to anyone who has not had such an experience first-hand. You will think, perhaps, that maybe the locals were just putting on their best face for the visitor. Or maybe that I am seeing them through romanticizing “happy-natives” lenses. But I am not speaking here of superficial good cheer or the phony smile of a man making the best of things. People in older cultures, connected to community and place, held close in a lineage of ancestors, woven into a web of personal and cultural stories, radiate a kind of solidity and presence that I rarely find in any modern person. When I interact with one of them, I know that whatever the measurable gains of the Ascent of Humanity, we have lost something immeasurably precious. And I know that until we recognize it and turn toward its recovery, that no further progress in lifespan or GDP or educational attainment will bring us closer to any place worth going.

What other elements of deep well-being elude our measurements? Authenticity of communication? The intimacy and vitality of our relationships? Familiarity with local plants and animals? Aesthetic nourishment from the built environment? Participation in meaningful collective endeavors? Sense of community and social solidarity? What we have lost is hard to measure, even if we were to try. For the quantitative mind, the mind of money and data, it hardly exists. Yet the loss casts a shadow on the heart, a dim longing that no assurance of new, happy life can assuage.

While the fullness of this loss – and, by implication, the potential in its recovery – is beyond measure, there are nonetheless statistics, left out of Pinker's analysis, that point to it. I am referring to the high levels of suicide, opioid addiction, meth addiction, pornography, gambling, anxiety, and depression that plague modern society and every modernizing society. These are not just random flies that have landed in the ointment of progress; they are symptoms of a profound crisis. When community disintegrates, when ties to nature and place are severed, when structures of meaning collapse, when the connections that make us whole wither, we grow hungry for addictive substitutes to numb the longing and fill the void.

The loss I speak of is inseparable from the very institutions – science, technology, industry, capitalism, and the political ideal of the rational individual – that Stephen Pinker says have delivered humanity from misery. We might be cautious, then, about attributing to these institutions certain incontestable improvements over Medieval times or the early Industrial Revolution. Could there be another explanation? Might they have come *despite* science, capitalism, rational individualism, etc., and not because of them?

### **The empathy hypothesis**

One of the improvements Stephen Pinker emphasizes is a decline in violence. War casualties, homicide, and violent crime in general have fallen to a fraction of their levels a generation or two ago. The decline in violence is real, but should we attribute it, as Pinker does, to democracy, reason, rule of law, data-driven policing, and so forth? I don't think so. Democracy is no insurance against war – in fact the United States has perpetrated far more military actions than any other nation in the last half-century. And is the decline in violent crime simply because we are better able to punish and protect ourselves from each other, clamping down on our savage impulses with the technologies of deterrence?

I have another hypothesis. The decline in violence is not the result of perfecting the world of the separate, self-interested rational subject. To the contrary: it is the result of the breakdown of that story, and the rise of empathy in its stead.

In the mythology of the separate individual, the purpose of the state was to ensure a balance between individual freedom and the common good by putting limits on the pursuit of self-interest. In the emerging mythology of interconnection, ecology, and interbeing, we awaken to the understanding that the good of others, human and otherwise, is inseparable from our own well-being.

The defining question of empathy is, What is it like to be you? In contrast, the mindset of war is the othering, the dehumanization and demonization of people who become the enemy. That becomes more difficult the more accustomed we are to considering the experience of another human being. That is why war, torture, capital punishment, and violence have become less acceptable. It is not that they are “irrational.” To the contrary: establishment think tanks are quite adept at inventing highly rational justifications for all of these.

In a world view in which competing self-interested actors is axiomatic, what is “rational” is to outcompete them, dominate them, and exploit them by any means necessary. It was not advances in science or reason that abolished the 14-hour workday, chattel slavery, or debtors’ prisons.

The worldview of ecology, interdependence, and interbeing offers different axioms on which to exercise our reason. Understanding that another person has an experience of being, and is subject to circumstances that condition their behavior, makes us less able to dehumanize them as a first step in harming them. Understanding that what happens to the world in some way happens to ourselves, reason no longer promotes war. Understanding that the health of soil, water, and ecosystems is inseparable from our own health, reason no longer urges their pillage.

In a perverse way, science & technology cheerleaders like Stephen Pinker are right: science has indeed ended the age of war. Not because we have grown so smart and so advanced over primitive impulses that we have transcended it. No, it is because science has brought us to such extremes of savagery that it has become impossible to maintain the myth of separation. The technological improvements in our capacity to murder and ruin make it increasingly clear that we cannot insulate ourselves from the harm we do to the other.

It was not primitive superstition that gave us the machine gun and the atomic bomb. Industry was not an evolutionary step beyond savagery; it applied savagery at an industrial scale. Rational administration of organizations did not elevate us beyond genocide; it enabled it to happen on unprecedented scale and with unprecedented efficiency in the Holocaust. Science did not show us the irrationality of war; it brought us to the very extreme of irrationality, the Mutually Assured Destruction of the Cold War. In that insanity was the seed of a truly evolutive understanding – that what we do to the other, happens to ourselves as well. That is why, aside from a retrograde cadre of American politicians, no one seriously considers using nuclear weapons today.

The horror we feel at the prospect of, say, nuking Pyongyang or Tehran is not the dread of radioactive blowback or retributive terror. It arises, I claim, from our empathic identification with the victims. As the consciousness of interbeing grows, we can no longer easily wave off their suffering as the just desserts of their wickedness or the regrettable but necessary price of freedom. It as if, on some level, it would be happening to ourselves.

To be sure, there is no shortage of human rights abuses, death squads, torture, domestic violence, military violence, and violent crime still in the world today. To observe, in the midst of it, a rising tide of compassion is not a whitewash of the ugliness, but a call for fuller participation in a movement.



On the personal level, it is a movement of kindness, compassion, empathy, taking ownership of one's judgements and projections, and – not contradictorily – of bravely speaking uncomfortable truths, exposing what was hidden, bringing violence and injustice to light, telling the stories that need to be heard. Together, these two threads of compassion and truth might weave a politics in which we call out the iniquity without judging the perpetrator, but instead seek to understand and change the circumstances of the perpetration.

From empathy, we seek not to punish criminals, but to understand the circumstances that breed crime. We seek not to fight terrorism, but to understand and change the conditions that generate it. We seek not to wall out immigrants, but to understand why people are so desperate in the first place to leave their homes and lands, and how we might be contributing to their desperation.

Empathy suggests the opposite of the conclusion offered by Stephen Pinker. It says, rather than more efficient legal penalties and “data-driven policing,” we might study [the approach](#) of new Philadelphia District Attorney Larry Krasner, who has directed prosecutors to stop seeking maximum sentences, stop prosecuting cannabis possession, steer offenders toward diversionary programs rather than penal programs, cutting inordinately long probation periods, and other reforms. Undergirding these measures is compassion: What is it like to be a criminal? An addict? A prostitute? Maybe we still want to stop you from continuing to do that, but we no longer desire to punish you. We want to offer you a realistic opportunity to live another way.

Similarly, the future of agriculture is not in more aggressive breeding, more powerful pesticides, or the further conversion of living soil into an industrial input. It is in knowing soil as a being and serving its living integrity, knowing that its health is inseparable from our own. In this way, the principle of empathy (What is it like to be you?) extends beyond criminal justice, foreign policy, and personal relationships. Agriculture, medicine, education, technology – no field is outside its bounds. Translating that principle into civilization's institutions (rather than extending the reach of reason, control, and domination) is what will bring real progress to humanity.

This vision of progress is not contrary to technological development; neither will science, reason, or technology automatically bring it about. All human capacities can be put into service to a future embodying the understanding that the world's wellbeing, human and otherwise, feeds our own.

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Charles Eisenstein is the author of several books, including *Sacred Economics* and *The More Beautiful World our Hearts Know is Possible*. His next book, *Climate: A New Story* comes out in Fall, 2018.

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