

Wretched or Contented? The Politics of Past Life

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An enduring myth of modern times is that life in the past was miserable. In the oft-quoted words of 17th century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes, the life of man in his natural state was 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short'.

A good example of the Hobbesian school of thought is Bjorn Lomborg's controversial book, *The skeptical environmentalist: measuring the real state of the world*. Citing historian Lawrence Stone, Lomborg (2001, p. 328) says: 'We are no longer almost chronically ill, our breaths stinking of rotting teeth, with festering sores, eczema, scabs, and suppurating boils'. He uses this to warn against 'a scary idealisation of our past' and as a descriptive benchmark against which to judge progress. It is recited as if it represents the human condition before we discovered material affluence.

I have travelled through many poor African and Asian countries; the description applies to no communities I saw. Nor does it fit many other societies and times, including indigenous and hunter-gatherer peoples. Stone's description is of one time and place, England in the 18th century – a period of rapid population growth and large-scale social dislocation as rural people flocked to over-crowded cities.

We might compare it with an assessment of life in medieval England in *The year 1000*, by Robert Lacey and Danny Danziger (1999, p. 201): 'We have more wealth, both personal and national, better technology, and infinitely more skilful ways of preserving and extending our lives. But whether we today display more wisdom or common humanity is an open question, and as we look back to discover how people coped with the daily difficulties of existence a thousand years ago, we might also consider whether, in all our sophistication, we could meet the challenges of their world with the same fortitude, good humour, and philosophy.'

The Hobbesian perspective also contrasts with the picture of Aboriginal life in *Treading lightly: the hidden wisdom of the world's oldest people*, by Karl-Erik Sveiby and Tex Skuthorpe (2006). Indigenous Australians have the longest continuous cultural history in the world. Their traditional ways of living were devastated by the arrival of Europeans, but early accounts suggest a life of relative abundance and ease. People spent between two and five hours a day gathering and preparing food; there were seasonal fluctuations but, except during extreme drought, it was not hard work. They spent a few hours more on making tools and shelters, allowing the rest of the day to be spent on 'intangibles'.

Sveiby and Skuthorpe (2006, pp. 4-6) say spiritual life was much more significant than material life for the Australian Aboriginal people. Instead of putting their surplus energy into squeezing more food out of the land, Aborigines expended it on spiritual, intellectual and artistic activities. 'They carried their palaces on their backs, their cathedrals were built in their minds and they felt no need to glorify human heroes. It is in the mind and the creativity of the spirit... that Aboriginal society stands out.' This created a psychology that was completely disinterested in acquiring and possessing material things.

James Cook noted in his journal after his visit to Australia in 1770: 'From what I have said of the Natives of New Holland they may appear to some to be the most wretched people upon Earth; but in reality they are far happier than we Europeans...the earth and the sea of their own accord furnishes them with all things necessary for life...' (cited in Sveiby & Skuthorpe, 2006, p. 209).

It doesn't make evolutionary sense to think we lived miserable lives for a million years or more until we discovered economic growth and material progress. Why would we be unhappy in the natural habitat to which we were biologically and psychologically adapted? It's not how wild animals are (they are mostly fit and healthy), and we have been, for most of our time on earth, animals in the wild.

It's true that life was shorter in the past. The dramatic rise in life expectancy, which globally has more than doubled in the last 100 years, is one of humanity's greatest achievements (although it was never an explicit goal of governments and is the result of more than increasing wealth). In *The biology of civilisation*, human ecologist Stephen Boyden (2004, pp. 18-19) says life expectancy in hunter-gatherer populations was much lower than in rich countries today, but probably higher than in most urban societies before the 20th century. Injury was a common risk and often led to infection. Serious illness was a greater threat to survival; people either recovered quickly – or they died.

On the other hand, he says, most people were well nourished and they did not suffer the infectious diseases of urban societies or the chronic non-communicable diseases associated with modern diets and lifestyles. 'Furthermore, I strongly suspect that most of the time most humans, like other animals living in their natural habitat, were more or less enjoying themselves.'

Life expectancy figures are deceptive and often misunderstood. They represent the number of years people can, on average, expect to live at prevailing mortality rates. One thousand years ago life expectancy was only about 24, but this was in part because a third of people died in the first year of life (Maddison, 2001). When I pointed this out to an American colleague who had quoted Hobbes in a journal paper, he asked what life expectancy would be if you adjusted for these infant deaths.

I put this to a colleague, Keith Dear, a biostatistician at the Australian National University, who did some quick back-of-the-envelope calculations. If life expectancy was 24 and a third of the infants died at age zero (you could say six months but it makes little difference) then the other two thirds of the population would live an average 36 years. If, hypothetically, a third of those who survived their first year died before age five (say at age two on average), then the remainder would have a life expectancy of 53. So those who survived childhood would often live much longer than

the life expectancy estimates. The *Bible* gives the human lifespan as three score years and ten (70). Hobbes himself (pessimist though he was) lived to over 90.

Dear and I asked another ANU colleague, demographer Bruce Caldwell, about these matters. Caldwell pointed out that Sveiby and Skuthorpe's description of Aboriginal society echoed that of Marshall Sahlins in a famous 1966 paper, *The original affluent society*, which argued that hunter-gatherers had (and have) less wants than Western materialistic people and could meet them more easily.

Caldwell said that while he would not describe anyone as being like Hobbesian man he was a little worried about exaggerating the case. A high proportion of mortality was infant and child mortality and adults were comparatively healthy, but there was still a lot of capricious adult mortality.

Caldwell said that Western observers were notoriously unreliable on both sides - some were capable of seeing people as wretched and others as strong, healthy individuals, even in the midst of famine. 'My guess is that, in general, both were wild exaggerations based more on preconceptions than proper observation. Cook's observations of course were one of the bases for the concept of the noble savage - itself a very misleading notion.'

So perceptions of past life are often tainted by modern political inclinations. Defenders and advocates of continuing material progress use the Hobbesian view to promote their case. Its critics (myself included) lean towards a more benign view of the past to make the point that how well we live is more than a matter of how long we live.

Let me be clear about my position. I am not suggesting past life was a bed of roses, an Arcadian idyll, or a Garden of Eden. Nor am I denying that there has been real progress in many areas in modern times (for example, gender, class, ethnic and racial equality and tolerance), or that there has been a great range and variety in the human condition at any one time in history. I am arguing that past life was not the wretched existence many people claim. And I believe it is valid, in assessing human progress, to present a generalised, large-scale view of the 'net effects' of social conditions and changes; this is, after all, how we currently legitimise material progress and the status quo.

Thus, in *The skeptical environmentalist*, Lomborg (2001, pp. 351-352) concludes that mankind's lot has improved vastly in every significant measurable field and that it is likely to continue to do so. 'Children born today - in both the industrialised world and developing countries - will live longer and be healthier, they will get more food, a better education, a higher standard of living, more leisure time and far more possibilities - without the global environment being destroyed. And that is a beautiful world.'

Lomborg attributes this progress almost wholly to economic growth and development, overlooking the contribution of many other social changes over this period. His basic premise is that the world is getting better because we are getting richer and 'we have become richer...primarily because of our fundamental organisation in a market economy'.

This is, broadly speaking, the view of progress that underpins the policies of governments around the world, including in rich countries like Australia: strong economic growth has been, and remains, the foundation on which to build a better life.

While acknowledging the benefits (including longer life), I challenge the almost exclusive focus on material wellbeing (as well as the underestimation of environmental constraints). Emotional, social and spiritual wellbeing barely register in this view of progress. And it is in these areas that progress has become most problematic, especially in rich nations. The neglect, even dismissal, of the non-material aspects of life flies in the face of human history and a huge body of psychological and other knowledge on the importance to human health and wellbeing of qualities such as meaning, belonging, identity and security.

My doctor commented of medicine: 'Before we just tried to keep people alive; now people are staying alive, but they're not very happy'. Similarly, governments might well say: 'Before we just tried to make people richer; now they are rich, but they're not very happy'. Instead of asking what this means, governments remain focused on making us richer still.

Prosperity isn't enough anymore. Costs to quality of life can no longer be regarded as unfortunate side-effects of a model of progress whose effects remain largely beneficial. Instead they need to be seen as a direct and fundamental consequence of how we currently define and pursue progress. It's not so much money, or possessions, or growth per se that matter, but the importance attached to them, personally and socially, which crowds out other things important to wellbeing. To put it another way, materialism is culturally hostile to personal, social and spiritual relationships.

Many recent reports and studies have highlighted deepening social divisions; our sense of being pressured and stressed; the burden of mental illness; our concerns about the future; the widening gap between the 'official', or orthodox, future political leaders promise and the future we want (Eckersley, 2005 & 2008). Add to these the stream of reports and new evidence on environmental threats such as global warming, resource depletion and species extinction and their potential costs, and you have a compelling case for redefining progress.

Sveiby and Skuthorpe (2006) say in *Treading lightly* that traditional Aboriginal society provides a model or recipe for sustainability. But the word that came to my mind was that this was a parable or allegory for our times, an extremely important one. The moral is not that we could or should adopt an indigenous lifestyle, but that we need to recognise that other, quite different, and even better, ways of making sense of the world and our lives are possible. And not only that: we need to examine our present situation at this most fundamental level if we are to have any chance of achieving a high, equitable and durable quality of life.

The writer C. S. Lewis (cited in Lacey & Danziger, 1999, p. 201) once cautioned against the 'snobbery of chronology': the assumption that because we have come later, we know better. It's a warning we should heed, especially at this moment in history.

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Notes

1. This essay was broadcast on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's Radio National on 24 February 2008.

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