

Apocalyptic Fears Have no Basis in Fact. We Are on Our Way up, Not down

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First, allow me to comment on a line in the preamble to this invitation. It reads, "Until the past decade or so, progress was widely assumed." I would ask, assumed by whom? Progress, variously defined, has been assumed by some, but certainly not by the great majority. Intellectuals, in particular, including many in the scientific community have consistently decried progress, warning of our destruction unless we do this or that to change our ways. Doomsday scenarios have been extremely popular for at least the last 50 years, when Paul Ehrlich warned of the "Population Bomb," followed within a decade by the Club of Rome proclaiming the imminent demise of all sorts of resources that would surely bring "progress" to a grinding halt. The fact that none of these gloomy predictions panned out did nothing to stop their growing popularity. Each time the disaster was more certain. Change is always worrisome and the acceleration of change brought on by the scientific and technological revolutions of the two centuries past is truly bewildering, making doom scenarios seemingly more and more credible. What tends to be ignored or downplayed are the enormous positive consequences, food production increase, improved sanitation, reduced infant mortality, longevity increase, and life quality improvement, driven by one discovery after another in agriculture, materials, health, manufacturing, transportation, and communication. Such is the substance of real human progress, and these trends are not going to stop or even slow down for the foreseeable future. Moreover, population growth, characteristically rapid in the early stages of the industrial revolution, levels off as societies become prosperous.

I agree that we presently appear to be experiencing an economic crisis of global scale. It may get worse, perhaps to the 1930's level, before it gets better. Nevertheless, humanity survived the 1930's and World War II, advancing into a new era of prosperity unknown previously. Such crises are cyclic in nature even though economists have a very poor understanding of how they are best resolved. However, this doesn't seem to have much to do with the present discussion. The global economic meltdown had nothing to do with global warming, population, or the limits of growth. When economics becomes a true science, then we may know better what to do about such crises. Nevertheless, if history is to judge, within five or six years things will start to get better again and the peoples of the world will reach a new level of prosperity.

Decline To Disaster

1% Remaining stockpiles of nuclear weapons suggest the remote possibility of a thermonuclear holocaust making the Earth unsupportive of life. For example, an elected President of the United States could well take into his or her head that the Rapture time has come so the good ones can all ascend to heaven to be with Jesus, leaving the rest to burn in hell. This scenario is very unlikely but not impossible.

Muddling Down

5% If fundamentalism of either an environmental or religious stripe gains sway, we could see a reduction in worldwide living standards coinciding perhaps with a reduction in population, a retreat into tribalism, and a widespread rejection of scientific method as a way to solve problems. I don't see such a trend. None of the predictions regarding decline and scarcity have been born out by subsequent events. Despite the persistence of these seemingly self-evident "truths," the actual data points in the opposite direction, as recorded exhaustively by the likes of Angus Maddison, Robert W. Fogel, Jeffrey Sachs, Julian Simon and others. Of course, the documented trends could all suddenly begin to make a u-turn starting tomorrow or the day after, justifying the alarmism, but I will bet on historic trends over unfounded apocalyptic fears.

Muddling Up

80 % Science and science-based technology has been transforming our world for the better for at least three hundred years. There are setbacks such as the two world wars and disturbing discoveries such as the atomic bomb, but through it all, on balance the circumstances of humanity have been improving at an accelerating rate (as I make clear in my book, *Acceleration*.) Knowledge creates wealth while it decreases the need for human labor. Thus a larger population works less, lives longer, eats better, and enjoys more of the life that each is given, provided that the new wealth is distributed fairly. The great challenge of the next generation is to work on that fairness issue. Scientific problem solving applied to air, water, and land makes the Earth more habitable in every climate zone. The model for this is Scandinavia but Canada, Australia, and the other states of Western Europe are not far behind in demonstrating that widespread fairness in the distribution of wealth can be achieved in a harmonious state.

Rise To Maturity

14% Many believe that the IT revolution is a game changer. We are surely becoming some sort of world brain through rapidly expanding computer power, both massed and distributed (laptops, tablets, smart cell phones.) Cell phones now connect billions of people worldwide, equalizing and democratizing the distribution of information. There will be a lot of chaos and mistakes as this "system" matures, but we will not go backward. What bothers me is that this world brain has so far evolved in what I would call a mindless way. Nobody knows exactly what is happening and nobody is

absolutely sure whether what is happening is ultimately for the good or the bad of humanity. The problems we have yet to solve are in the realm of social, not physical science. We need to learn how to distribute wealth fairly for a stable and productive society (economics). We need to learn how to eliminate violence from conflicts. We need to learn how to resolve conflicts consistently in a non-zero sum manner, as was done in the resolution of the Cold War. Thus, our rise to maturity depends to a great extent on the rise to maturity of the social sciences. I can see that day coming but not in my lifetime.

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