

## Norberg, Johan (2016). *Progress. Ten reasons to look forward to the future*<sup>1</sup>

Rolf A. E. Mueller

Dept. of Agricultural Economics, Christian-Albrechts-University, Kiel, Germany  
[raem@agric-econ.uni-kiel.de](mailto:raem@agric-econ.uni-kiel.de)

Received April 2017, accepted April 2017, available online May 2017

### Book Review

A chestnut of practical wisdom, usually attributed to Mark Twain, holds, "It ain't what you don't know that gets you into trouble. It's what you know for sure that just ain't so." We all have learned the hard way that something we knew for sure just ain't so - when our brilliant, gripping presentation bored our audience stiff, or when our investment in some stocks tanked even though we knew for sure that their value would grow forever. Embarrassing as such personal experiences may be, they rarely matter much. Things are different when those in power know things for sure that ain't so, or even worse, when that 'what ain't so' evolves into an epidemic pseudodoxy.

A popular pseudodoxy, or rather category of pseudodoxia, is of the kind, '*the human condition is deteriorating with respect to x*', where x may be nearly anything, health, wealth, food security, safety, morals, the intelligence of most other people, every aspect of the environment, you name it. This type of epidemic pseudodoxy is certainly as old as the onset of rapid human progress and flourishing. Thus, in 1830 Lord Thomas Macaulay had asked "On what principle is it that, when we see nothing but improvement behind us, we are to expect nothing but deterioration before us?" (Macaulay, T. B. 1830, cited in Ridley, 2010, p. 11). Norberg's highly readable book transplants Macaulay's question into modern times.

The book has three parts: the Introduction, ten chapters that make the argument for human progress, and an epilogue that answers in part Macaulay's question. In the Introduction Norberg challenges the widespread pessimism about the trend in the human condition and he claims, "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" (p. 3). Here Norberg also warns us that sticking to pessimistic pseudodoxia in view of evident progress may have undesirable consequences: "When we don't see the progress we have made, we begin to search for scapegoats for the problems that remain" (p. 5)

Norberg's strategy for containing and exorcising epidemic pessimistic pseudodoxia is straightforward. In ten chapters of his book he develops arguments of the pattern, '*the human condition is progressing with respect to x*'. The individual chapters then address different 'x' which are, in the sequence of the chapters, 'Food', 'Sanitation', 'Life expectancy', 'Poverty', 'Violence', 'The environment', 'Literacy', 'Freedom', 'Equality', and the "The next generation". Because food is of particular interest to the readers of this journal, I use this chapter to describe the rhetoric that Norberg employs to contain and to exorcise pessimistic pseudodoxia about the human condition. I shall summarize the remaining chapters only briefly.

<sup>1</sup> Norberg, Johan (2016). *Progress. Ten reasons to look forward to the future*. London: Oneworld Publications. Hardcover. £16.99/US\$24.99

In Chapter 1 Norberg persuades his readers that most of humanity has escaped from hunger. The tools he employs for this purpose are mainly four: facts and figures from the past and the present, stories, graphs, and tables, but no mathematical formulae or models. Norberg begins the chapter with reminding his readers of the many devastating famines that repeatedly occurred in Europe and elsewhere up to the 19th century: in India in 1630-1, in France in 1662, in Finland and Sweden in 1695-7, and again in Sweden in 1868. But famines were only the cataclysmic events that interrupted periods of chronic misery and hunger for many, periods during which large sections of the people, such as those of France and England, were unable to perform work for lack of sufficient food energy. Norberg then recounts how the Malthusian predicament was broken by the introduction of individual property rights to farmers, by international trade and specialization, and by new agricultural technologies, in particular by the introduction of artificial fertilizer. This invention Norberg regards as "one of the most powerful weapons against the scourge of hunger ..." (p. 14).

Moving closer to the present, Norberg reminds us of the attention-gripping apocalyptic forecasts of the 1960s that predicted massive famines because of rapid population growth in the developing world, in particular in South Asia. The food apocalypse didn't happen. It was averted, Norberg tells us, by Norman Borlaug whose high-yielding crops unleashed the Green Revolution in Mexico, India, and Pakistan. The new seeds enabled the farmers of these countries to increase their grain production faster than the countries' populations did grow. Food progress, however, goes beyond averting famines. Per capita food supplies have increased substantially after World War II, undernourishment keeps falling in all world regions, including in Africa, and average heights of people are increasing in all world regions except Africa. Towards the end of the chapter Norberg reminds his readers of the importance of the political system, in particular of democracy and private property rights, for keeping hunger at bay.

Finally, an important observation that Norberg makes about the connection between food supplies and demography needs to be mentioned. He suggests, "Quite possibly, the most important long-term effect of the Green Revolution was that it reduced the number of mouths that had to be fed, long-term. When children began to survive to adulthood, parents began to have fewer children" (p. 21). If this behavior became a stable relationship, Malthus' theory could be scrapped for good.

"Sanitation" is the domain of progress following "Food". This chapter is mainly concerned with progress in providing clean water and disposing of filthy sewage. The benefits of this are significant: diseases, such as cholera and diarrhea, are avoided, child mortality is reduced, and less time is wasted on fetching water and rendering it drinkable. The extension of life expectancy and its causes are the subject of chapter 3. Perhaps the most remarkable fact of prolonged life expectancy due to reduced child mortality is its global uniformity. Thus Norberg reminds us, "... there is not a single country that hasn't seen improvement in infant and child mortality" (p. 61). Norberg begins his chapter "Poverty" with a justifiable radical change of perspective on poverty. He suggests, "We do not need an explanation for poverty because that is the starting point for everybody. Poverty is what you have until you create wealth." He then shows how the conventional measures of poverty, such as the percentage of population below a poverty threshold, or GDP per capita, have improved since the time shortly before the onset of the Industrial Revolution. The game changers for Norberg were the Industrial Revolution and our era of globalization, which, in terms of the number of people it has lifted out of poverty per annum, was fifty times bigger than the Industrial Revolution. In his chapter on "Violence" Norberg summarizes the point, recently made in much detail by Pinker, that violence is on the retreat, despite the current rise in killings in the name of some god or other. An important cause of this retreat is "commerce and trade [which] has made countries more interested in material beneficial exchange ..." (p. 104). Norberg closes this chapter with an apt quotation from von Mises who reminded the parties of a war of its basic economic consequences, "... if the tailor goes to war against the baker, he must henceforth bake his own bread" (p. 105). The chapters on "The environment," "Literacy," "Liberty," and "Equality" are, perhaps, less immediately relevant for specialists on food and agriculture. In these chapters Norberg provides evidence of reduced environmental pollution and resource depletion, of the progress of literacy in the world, and of the rapid spread of democracy such that, "Forty per cent of the world population now lives in a free country" (p. 159). In his chapter on "Equality," Norberg highlights trends in discrimination by race, sex, or sexual orientation. Discrimination, he argues, is fading world-wide despite sizable nests of persistence. The book's final chapter is about "The next generation". Here Norberg is concerned with the role of children who, Norberg claims, "... are no longer seen as a resource to exploit, instead they are an investment in the future of the family ..." (p. 196).

In the "Epilogue" Norberg refers to evidence which shows that peoples' pessimistic views about the human condition are things that they know but that ain't so, and he suggests some explanations for the existence of the pseudodoxia. The evidence to which Norberg refers is the ignorance surveys which were initiated by the late Hans Rosling. These surveys involved "chimpanzee tests", which showed that the respondents' answers to questions about the state of the world were, on average, less accurate than

random answers by ignorant chimpanzees would have been (Gapminder Foundation). Obviously, it is not what we don't know that may make us more ignorant than chimpanzees, but it is the things we know but that ain't so. With this insight we are cast back to Macaulay's question: Why is this so? Norberg suggests two mutually re-enforcing concauses: The media's strong preference for bad news over good ones, and quirks in the human psychology that obstruct an unbiased perception of reality.

Norberg is no myopic Candide blinded by past progress. Rather, he warns us that future progress is threatened by financial crisis, global warming, the possibility of large-scale war, and by terrorism. To this list of threats Norberg adds our own fear: "Most of all, people led by fear might curtail the freedom and the openness that progress depends on" (p. 215-6). Considering that this fear is often based on knowledge that is worse than that of chimps, such a fate would shed a very bad light on the state of collective human rationality.

Norberg has to be congratulated for his well-written book which deserves to be widely read. It is not a scholarly, learned book. Rather, it is of a genre that appeals to educated readers who want to become informed about the state of knowledge in domains that are of significant general concern. Norberg's style and rhetoric makes for pleasant and easy reading - you can jump into a chapter during a boring meeting or jump out of one when your plane has landed. The book's references are sufficiently extensive to give readers a lead to the more specialized literature.

#### References

Gapminder Foundation (n. d.). <http://www.gapminder.org/ignorance/>

Pinker, S. (2011). *The better angels of our nature: Why violence has declined*. New York: Viking.

Ridley, M. (2010). *The rational optimist: How prosperity evolves*. New York: Harper.