

YOUR DAILY ARABIC PROVERB
If only children could escape the fate of death, suspended in the heavens momentarily, until the war ends, and then return to their homes unharmed.
Ghassan Kanafani
(Palestinian political activist and man of letters)

Opinion 2023



TOMORROW
Kerry Boyd Anderson on the foreign policy challenges US President Joe Biden will face in the year ahead



ILLUSTRATION FOR ARAB NEWS: PEP BOATELLA

Global progress is in peril

It has been 10 years since I wrote “The Great Escape,” which tells the story of how human life improved over the past 250 years, particularly in terms of longevity and material living standards. But the past decade has been unkind to my overwhelmingly positive account. My observation that “life is better now than at any time in history” may have been true in 2013, but it probably is not today, even for the typical person. The question is whether this reversal will be temporary or whether it is only the beginning of worse to come. Do recent events demand that the basic story be retold?

It is all too easy to focus on current threats, while ignoring the past and discounting the longer-run forces that prevailed even in the face of terrible setbacks. But one must remember that we have an enormous accumulation of useful knowledge — more than any of our predecessors. It will not allow us to solve every urgent problem, but it is neither easily lost nor forgotten.

We should also remember how and why things got better in the past; how the desire to escape from poverty, disease and death brought steady improvements. Solutions were rarely immediate, but after the Enlightenment the triumph of reason over unthinking obedience and dogma increasingly produced reliable answers to questions old and new.

Still, while the long-term trends of progress are clear, history offers no support for blind optimism. Improvements in human well-being have repeatedly confronted reversals, many of them lengthy, and some characterized by unimaginable devastation.

Most recently, the World Health Organization estimates that COVID-19 has killed close to 7 million people — and possibly multiples of that number — many of them in rich countries, including nearly 1.2 million Americans. The pandemic arrested economic growth in many countries and almost certainly halted the ongoing reduction in global poverty.

Typically, after such catastrophes, progress eventually resumes, with the subsequent recoveries delivering health and wealth outcomes that exceed their previous highs. True, this historical fact offers no comfort to those who died or lost relatives and friends. Progress does not expunge previous horrors. But it does hold out the hope of better lives for the survivors and for subsequent generations.

A thousand years from now, or perhaps much sooner, the last 250 years may be seen as a bygone golden age, a flash in history’s panorama, an exception to the normal state of misery and early death. Recent events present a depressing catalog: slow or negative growth; rising global temperatures; resurgent infectious diseases; antidemocratic and right-wing populist politics; stalling globalization; stagnant life expectancy; and increased geopolitical tensions, particularly between the world’s two largest economies, the US and China. Are we returning to a pre-Enlightenment world ruled by priests and warlords or is today’s darker outlook just another temporary setback that will be overcome in time?

The single biggest threat to continued progress is climate change. Though we know what needs to be done, and though the required technologies are rapidly improving and becoming more affordable, national and international politics have not supported the necessary action. Opportunistic politicians can advance their own careers by



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opposing such a costly and sweeping adjustment and there are vast war chests — especially in the fossil fuel industries — committed to preserving the status quo. Even in the face of frightening weather patterns that are almost impossible to explain without reference to anthropogenic climate change, there is a real possibility that not enough will be done before it is too late.

Health threats will also remain central to the story of progress and its reversals. On the one hand, the positive story to emerge from the pandemic is about resilience. After developing vaccines with incredible speed, we achieved a relatively rapid economic rebound. Beyond the death toll and the still unclear effects of “long COVID,” the most obvious lasting damage was confined to schoolchildren, many of whom lost out on years of education. On the other hand, the negative story of the pandemic is that it was merely a preview of what awaits us.

I do not know whether to believe the positive or the negative account. Instead, I would simply stress the possibility that the future may have more morbidity and mortality than we have grown accustomed to.

Meanwhile, over the past quarter-century, national and international political arrangements have undergone profound changes, with right-wing populism spreading in rich democracies and threatening domestic and



ANGUS DEATON

Angus Deaton, the 2015 Nobel laureate in economics, is Professor Emeritus of Economics and International Affairs at the Princeton School of Public and International Affairs, Presidential Professor of Economics at the University of Southern California, and co-author of “Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism” (Princeton University Press, 2020).

This article was adapted from a preface to the Princeton Classics edition of “The Great Escape,” to be published in 2024.

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international institutions. Globalization, especially, has become a source of discontent. The fact that it helped bring about an unprecedented reduction in poverty has not assuaged domestic discontent in the rich world; it has inflamed it.

To many working people in the US and Europe, the world population’s great escape from destitution is seen as having come at their expense, by eliminating their jobs and hollowing out their communities. Even if the world overall is better off, the beneficiaries cannot vote in rich countries, leaving only those who have been hurt to complain that they did not sign up for such involuntary foreign aid. Similarly, while immigration from poorer to richer countries has helped millions leave poverty, many domestic workers in rich countries see it as a threat to their own livelihoods and status.

Whether such perceptions are inaccurate or overblown is beside the point. What matters, politically, is that the current great escape is not particularly popular in rich countries. A significant share of voters

regard immigration and globalization as favoring a minority of well-educated, cosmopolitan elites. Working people who believe they have been harmed by such policies are thus tempted to abandon democratic arrangements that seem to be working for international business and domestic elites, but not for them. The risk now is that these side effects of the great escape will become so severe as to slow or reverse it.

In the US, a half-century of wage and income stagnation for the working class has been accompanied by a slow reversal of progress against mortality. Although Americans with a college education continue to enjoy reduced mortality, those without it have been losing years of life since 2010.

On a more positive note, since drug epidemics have come and gone throughout history, it is reasonable to hope that the opioid crisis will eventually recede, too. Moreover, after two decades of stagnation from 1970 to 1990, cancer rates have been falling, owing to declines in the prevalence of smoking and various medical and scientific advances. This positive trend appears to have some room to run, not least because the new knowledge is transferable between countries, several of which have participated in creating the science that is driving it. My guess is that “normal” progress in life expectancy will eventually resume, probably at a

slower rate and with all the necessary caveats about pandemics and climate change.

As populism has risen in the US, China has gone from being a partner to an apparent threat. The growing hostility between the two countries has now reached a point that threatens international stability — and even international peace. Meanwhile, economic growth in China has weakened, partly because of COVID-19, but more importantly because of domestic policies and demographic factors.

The scope for serious miscalculation in the Sino-American rivalry has risen, along with counterproductive saber-rattling in both countries. America’s valid complaints against China have been exaggerated by politicians playing to populist sentiment.

Notwithstanding the cynical politics, we clearly cannot and should not seek a return to the era of hyper-globalization. We urgently need a new global economic order that can preserve and extend the great escape, but with greater care for domestic politics and for the well-being of non-wealthy, less-



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educated majorities in wealthy countries. To its credit, the current US administration’s policy agenda is directed toward this end and much now depends on its long-term success.

In retrospect, the 2008 financial crisis has had much longer-

lasting negative effects than I anticipated. In the US, much of the population has lost confidence in capitalism and the idea that a rising tide lifts all boats. The financiers who caused that debacle sailed off in their yachts, untouched, while smaller craft were smashed into flotsam, their passengers reduced to homelessness, joblessness and despair.

In Britain and much of Europe, the crisis was followed by austerity policies that devastated public services. With little to no economic growth ever since, it is little wonder that populism’s appeal has grown and that democracy and capitalism have fallen out of favor. This development does not bode well for the future. Populists and autocrats have little respect for institutions, including not only democratic processes and protections for minorities, but also the centers of scientific knowledge associated with educated elites.

Fifty years from now, if we are still living in an increasingly illiberal and undemocratic world, we may not even be able to tell, other than anecdotally, whether the great escape continued or was choked off.