



The Enlightenment



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Enlightenment Now

The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress

By Steven Pinker

Book Review by Don Hatch

Enlightenment Now is the title of Harvard Psychology Professor Steven Pinker's most recent book. This is a scholarly tome of 453 pages containing 75 illustrative graphs that assist in explaining the subjects being considered, plus 74 pages of small-print supportive notes. The book is divided into three parts: Enlightenment; Progress; and Reason, Science and Humanism. Interestingly, the last chapter on Humanism, at 45 pages, is significantly longer than any of the others. Reading through the book one will notice that the word *flourishing* appears over and over. It is on the first page, on the last and on many in between. It is the concept of a flourishing life-style for individual humans in an enlightened democratic society that is the principal hallmark of *Enlightenment Now*.

Before getting into the contents of the book, I believe it will be helpful to briefly review the historical events that led up to the era that came to be known as "The Enlightenment." The seeds of the Enlightenment were sown in ancient Greece. It is well recognized that a democratic government is an essential attribute of an enlightened society, and, as is well-known, the Greek state of Athens is regarded as the cradle of democracy. And then there is Socrates' "good life." He is reputed to have said, "the unexamined life is not worth living," in other words, live well and learn from your mistakes. (Pinker uses the term flourishing life rather than good life). After the era of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, two philosophies arose that later influenced the Enlightenment. They were Epicureanism and Stoicism. The Epicureans believed that if there were gods, they had no influence whatsoever over events occurring on earth, and that humans should endeavour to live enjoyable, but moderate lives. Like democracy, Epicurean secularism is an essential characteristic of an enlightened society. Stoicism is based partly on what became known as the serenity prayer: "Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." Stoicism is perhaps best exemplified by Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius' book *Meditations*, a volume packed full of wisdom on how to live a flourishing life in an enlightened atmosphere.

So, in Italy at the start of the fourth century CE, there existed the basis of a life-style with the potential to develop into something great, but unfortunately Western civilization suffered a setback for about a thousand years with the ascendance of the Roman Catholic Church. This Church was a dictatorial top-down organization that discouraged science and democracy, and viciously destroyed much classical literature that the church leaders considered to be of a pagan nature. Fortunately, cracks began to occur with the advent of the Italian Renaissance in the fourteenth century along with the rediscovery of the classics of Greece and Rome. Among these discoveries was Lucretius' *On the Nature of the Universe*, containing the teachings of Epicurus, as well as the already mentioned *Meditations* by Marcus Aurelius.

The next breakthrough was the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century. This event allowed science and democracy to begin an ascent in northern Europe that led up to the period of the Enlightenment philosophers, who reasoned that a trend toward a secular society, accompanied by a scientific/technological revolution and an industrial revolution, could possibly lead to a humanistic society with citizens enjoying a peaceful satisfying lifestyle. Alas, only parts of these hopes materialized. With the advent of machines, appliances, and electronic gadgets, much arduous manual labour disappeared, and various means of transportation became ubiquitous. Life became easier, but wars continued, and economies experienced ups and downs including the roaring twenties and the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Now, back to the book wherein Pinker outlines how the coming together of Enlightenment values after WW II in many Western countries resulted in the establishment of a large, prosperous middle class with citizens living satisfying, flourishing lives in liberal social democracies. He then goes on to lament the decline of this so-called golden age with increasing inequality, a declining middle class, and the rise of populism that enabled Trump to get elected in the U. S. and caused the advent of Brexit in the U. K.

Before getting into the details of the book, I think it is worth noting that the very first words in the book, even before the list of contents, are those of the Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza:

Those who are governed by reason desire nothing for themselves which they do not also desire for the rest of humankind.

These words of wisdom, I believe, set the tone for Pinker's discourse on the Enlightenment.

Part I - Enlightenment

Pinker describes the brainchildren of the Enlightenment as:

the norms of free speech, nonviolence, cooperation, cosmopolitanism, human rights and an acknowledgment of human fallibility, plus the institutions of science, education, media, democratic government, international organizations and markets.

To this I think he should have added peace.

Chapter one is entitled "Dare to Understand," taken from David Deutsch's book *The Beginning of Infinity*. Deutsch states, "all evils are due to insufficient knowledge; problems are solvable and if institutions wish

to keep improving, the most important knowledge they should embody is knowledge of how to detect and eliminate errors.”

Pinker goes on to comment on the subtitle of the book, “The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism and Progress.” Foremost is reason. For example, it was reason that led most of the Enlightenment thinkers to repudiate belief in an anthropomorphic God who took an interest in human affairs. And the second item, science, is the refining of reason to understand the world. The scientific revolution was a major component on the march toward Enlightenment. An essential part of the third item, humanism, was the need for a secular foundation for morality. A deity passing judgement on the actions of humans is not necessary for a system of ethics and morality. There will be much more on humanism when we get to the last chapter entitled Humanism. The fourth item in the subtitle is progress, which is also the title of Part II. As is plain for all to see, it was during the last 500 years that humans have brought about progress at an astounding rate, like no other era in the history of human civilization. But progress should consist of more than advances in science and technology and improvements in creature comforts. Quality of life should also be considered. Pinker states, “Since any defence of reason, science, and humanism would count for nothing if, two hundred and fifty years after the Enlightenment, we’re no better off than our ancestors were in the Dark Ages. Therefore, an appraisal of human progress is where one must begin.” This leads to Part II - Progress.

Part II – Progress

In Part II, Pinker examines 16 different categories of progress (although four categories – The Environment, Inequality, Terrorism, and Existential Threats - are retrogressive in tone rather than progressive). We will briefly touch on each one.

Life – There has been great progress in the areas of life expectancy, child mortality, and maternal mortality. In 1770, average life expectancy in Europe and North America was about 35 years. Today it is about 80 years, and more and more people are reaching the age of 100. In the same regions and same time-period, child deaths before age 5 have been reduced from 35% of all children born to around 2%, while maternal deaths have been reduced from 1.2% to 0.004%.

Health – The rise in life expectancy has been largely due to the efforts of medical scientists devising methods of curing, preventing, and in some cases like small pox, eliminating diseases. Also, changes in diets as well as exercise programs have been helpful in increasing life expectancy.

Sustenance – The average woman requires around 2000 calories per day and the average man 2500 to remain healthy. Throughout history famines have occurred as a result of droughts, floods, economic conditions, or other causes, resulting in millions of people being undernourished and suffering from various illnesses, all too often resulting in death. Today, however, there is no need for anyone to starve. Improved agricultural practices have raised food production to a level that everyone can be fed. In fact, in some countries, people are eating too much and obesity is a problem. If people are starving today – and they are in certain areas – it is most likely due to political causes that prevent international aid.

Wealth – Among the brainchildren of the Enlightenment is the realization that wealth is created by human activity. Prior to 1800, Gross World Product barely increased. Slowly it began to increase, and after 1900 it took off in leaps and bounds to reach 110 trillion (in international dollars) in 2011. One result of the

increased wealth is that extreme poverty in the world has been reduced from 90% of world population in 1820 to less than 10% today. Advances in science and technology, globalization, and economic development in general, have aided in increasing world wealth.

Inequality – In the Western world after WW II, prosperous economies and the establishment of social safety nets in many countries resulted in a rising middle class, and inequality was at an all-time low. After 1980, however, inequality began to increase as the wealthy 1% began to share a larger and larger percentage of national income, particularly in the U.S., where 1% of the population earns around 20% of national income. While it is unrealistic to assume everyone should earn the same, it is morally important that everyone should earn enough to adequately subsist. Reversing the trend toward increasing inequality is a major challenge facing world leaders. Will competent leaders be found that are up to the challenge?

Environment – Prior to the Industrial Revolution, human activities had little effect on the environment. Since 1800, however, certain industrial activities have negatively effected air and water quality, and there have also been instances of ground pollution. Recently we have also been hearing more about an abundance of non-disposable plastics in our oceans as well as further destruction of the rain forests. And of course, there is global warming, which some industrialists and even politicians say does not exist, despite scientific evidence to the contrary. Surely all humans must be concerned that we protect and preserve our environment for our descendants. Again, world leaders face a daunting challenge in this regard, but they may be helped by advances in science and technology that will hopefully find ways of reducing pollution.

Peace – In one of Pinker’s previous books, entitled *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, he demonstrates that as time progressed, violence among humans decreased. In *Enlightenment Now*, he presents graphs showing just how wars of great powers, battle deaths, and genocide have significantly decreased over the years. He ends this section by saying, “Over the long run, a world in which all parties refrain from war is better for everyone. Inventions such as trade, democracy, economic development, peace-keeping forces, and international law and norms are tools that help to build that world.”

Safety – Using graphs, Pinker points out how the world is getting safer. Deaths from homicide, motor vehicle accidents, pedestrian accidents, plane crashes, falls, fires, drownings, occupational accidents, natural disasters, and lightning strikes are all in decline.

Terrorism – As nationalistic wars declined, terrorist activities increased with the incidents of September 11, 2001 in the U.S. bringing terrorism to the forefront. Since then, deaths from terrorist attacks in various cities in the West, while being relatively low in number, are nevertheless still frightening. And the threats of cells of radical Islamic terrorists are still with us. More on this in Part III.

Democracy – Pinker states: “A good democratic government allows people to pursue their lives in safety, protected from the violence of anarchy, and in freedom protected from the violence of tyranny. For that reason alone, democracy is a major contributor to human flourishing. But it is not the only reason: democracies also have higher rates of economic growth, fewer wars and genocides, healthier and better-educated citizens, and virtually no famines.” Certainly, democracies are superior to communism and the theocracies in the Islamic world, as well as the authoritarian capitalism in China where there are concerns about human rights and free speech. Nevertheless, with the rise in populism, some scholars are expressing

concern that the democratic process may be in danger of decline. Will a better system emerge, or will democracy still be the best of all alternatives?

Equal Rights – Equal rights covers a number of areas including equal pay for men and women, discrimination by race or creed, freedom for the LGBTQ community, and child labour. Much improvement has occurred concerning human rights issues throughout democratic countries, but much remains to be done in other parts of the world. For example, Sharia law condoning barbaric practices such as female circumcision and even the death penalty for something as simple as apostasy, is still present in some Islamic countries. Yes, there is still a long way to go in ensuring fair equal rights for all the world's citizens.

Knowledge – The importance of knowledge in improving people's well-being has already been mentioned on page 2. Practically, it revolves around education. Formal education has been one of the most, if not the most, important factor in the betterment of humankind. It is those countries that have educated their children most intensely that have grown the fastest. Also, literacy and numeracy have been the foundation of wealth creation, and richer countries tend to be more peaceful and more democratic. Studies show that well-educated people are more enlightened and less racist, sexist, xenophobic, homophobic, and authoritarian. Literacy is a flagship of human progress. Hurrah for education and the acquisition of knowledge!

Quality of Life – Since the start of the Industrial Revolution, a number of changes and inventions have taken place, resulting in individuals having more leisure time. Work hours have been reduced from 60 hours per week to 40 or less. More people are retiring at an earlier age (at least up to now) than in previous decades. Hours of housework have been drastically reduced by the inventions of electrical appliances including washing machines, refrigerators, stoves, vacuum cleaners, dishwashers, and microwave ovens. Furnaces, running water in the home, along with flush toilets, have provided welcomed creature comforts. Low-cost electric lighting has become ubiquitous, turning night into day. Spending on necessities as a percentage of income has declined from 60% in 1925 to about 33% today in the U. S. As a result, leisure time has increased over time to as much as 40 hours per week for men and 33 hours per week for women. So, what are people doing with this extra time and money? Are they enriching the quality of their lives by connecting with loved ones and friends, experiencing the richness of the natural and cultural worlds, and assessing the fruits of intellectual and artistic creativity, or are they just buying more golf clubs and designer bags? Obviously, some of both is happening, leading to the question, are people happier? Happiness is the title of the next chapter.

Happiness – Are people happier in general today than they were in times gone by? I will not attempt to answer this question because I do not have the space to attempt to adequately justify an answer one way or the other. In any case, defining happiness is a subjective matter, and answers no doubt will vary from one person to another. What I will attempt to do instead, is identify where and under what conditions people are the happiest. The results of happiness surveys are published in the media from time to time, and these results indicate that people are happiest in countries that have social/democratic governments, have adequate social safety nets, optimum freedom, and a firm separation of church and state. The top ten countries usually include Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Canada, New Zealand, Australia and Switzerland, with the order varying from year to year. In 2016 the United States came in at thirteenth, probably because this country does not have adequate social safety nets. Conclusion: It is in countries where enlightenment values prevail that people are the happiest!

Existential Threats – For half a century the four horsemen of the modern apocalypse have been overpopulation, resource shortages, pollution, and nuclear war. To these, global warming should probably be added. But just how serious are these threats? If developing countries are able to become more prosperous and less religious, birthrates will drop, and world population should level off. Not long ago there were dire forecasts predicting serious shortages of oil. This prediction has proved to be false. Pollution is still a major concern, but the problems can be solved with human ingenuity and will-power. Since WW II the threat of global annihilation has been a deterrence to nuclear war. Stockpiles have been reduced and, with common-sense negotiations and with trust, can be reduced still further. And human intervention can minimize the threat of global warming. Yes, these existential threats can be dealt with, but only through cooperative effort and a willingness to pay the economic cost. Perhaps a more serious existential threat is the unknown future economic effect of the ever-increasing use of robots, newer digital technologies, and the applications of Artificial Intelligence. Will human ingenuity cope successfully with these innovations, or will the world economy stagnate, causing the quality of human life to be negatively affected? This question leads to the next chapter.

The Future of Progress – The Enlightenment, an ongoing process of discovery and human betterment, has worked. The Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment set in motion the process of using knowledge to improve the human condition. The zenith of societies based on Enlightenment values occurred in the thirty-year period after the end of WW II, when Gross World Product per capita grew at an annual rate of 3.4%. Since 1975, the rate has fallen to around 1.4% and income inequality is rising. Populism is also on the rise and government debts are increasing. If economies stagnate, things could get ugly. So, what lies ahead? No one can predict for certain, but it is clear we cannot revert to the conditions present after WW II as Trump implies in his “Make America Great Again” slogan. Conditions have changed too much and these changes are accelerating, putting humanity in a place it has never been before. Will capitalist greed prevail and prevent a return to societies where a majority of humans are able to live flourishing prosperous lives under conditions where Enlightenment values are allowed to exist? Or will human progress come to a standstill? Nevertheless, whatever happens, digital technology will accelerate, for better or for worse.

Part III

Having dealt with Progress in Part II, Part III considers the other subjects in the subtitle, Reason, Science, and Humanism.

Reason – Since the start of the Enlightenment, reason has advanced and prevailed in a number of forms of progress that almost everyone has come to accept, such as democracy, abolition of slavery, social safety nets, separation of church and state, decline of national wars, and the expansion of human and civil rights. In fact, these are the attributes that existed in most Western countries after WW II and are still prevalent in many. But the United States is an exception where reason seems to have gone out the window particularly in two areas, evangelical religion and politics.

Consider religion. Christians are asked to muster the faith to believe that Jesus of Nazareth was the promised Messiah, son of God, born of a virgin, lived, died on the cross, rose from the dead, ascended into heaven to sit on the right hand of God. Furthermore, those who believe in him, will have their sins washed away and after death will end up in an idyllic heaven. Is any of this reasonable in our scientific age? Surely

any critical-thinking person would conclude that these beliefs are nonsensical and reason that secularism is a much better alternative. This has happened in most Western countries, where church attendance is on the decline, but not in the U.S., where evangelicals have gained political clout and beyond all rhyme and reason helped elect the egotistical, thin-skinned, lying buffoon, Donald Trump.

And reason has also gone out the window when it comes to U.S. politics. The control of Congress by the Republican Party that became synonymous with the extreme right has been pernicious, because it is so convinced of the righteousness of its cause and the evils of its rivals, with the result that it has undermined the institutions of democracy to get what it wants. They have convinced large numbers of voters that socialism is a dirty word and must be avoided at all costs, that taxes must be lowered, government regulations are bad, and compromise is a weakness. They do not seem to recognize that the happiest people in the world pay high taxes. These people also live in social/democratic countries with governments that are concerned about the health and welfare of all citizens, thus providing them with adequate social safety nets.

Why is the U.S. such an exception? Pinker suggests it is partly due to education. It is no secret that the U.S. education system is in a mess and needs upgrading. For example, there are those who still want creationism taught in science classes, rather than or along with Darwinian evolution. This debate ended long ago in most secular democratic countries. Another reason, particularly concerning religion, is that many children just adopt the beliefs of their parents and accept them without thinking critically.

Despite what is going on now in the U.S., Pinker expresses hope when he says, “The beauty of reason is that it can always be applied to understand the failures of reason.” In the last paragraph of this chapter he opines, “However long it takes, we must not let the existence of cognitive and emotional bias or the spasms of irrationality in the political arena discourage us from the Enlightenment ideal of relentlessly pursuing reason and truth. If we can identify ways in which humans are irrational, we must know what rationality is. Since there is nothing special about *us*, our fellows must have at least some capacity for rationality as well. And it is in the very nature of rationality that reasoners can always step back, consider their own shortcomings and reason out ways to work around them.”

Science – Since the beginning of the Enlightenment, there has been progress in many areas, as has been noted above in the section on progress, but there is one realm of accomplishment that exceeds all others, and that is science. The progress made as a result of advances in science and its partner, technology, have been nothing less than spectacular. Science has explained much about the history of the universe, the forces that make us tick, the stuff we’re made of, the origin of living things, and the machinery of life including our mental life. Yes, there are still unknowns including the true nature of gravity and black holes, dark matter, dark energy, what existed before the Big Bang, and what exactly is consciousness? But eventually these mysteries will probably be solved.

In this chapter, Pinker takes up a lot of space to comment on the lack of appreciation of the discipline of science in contemporary society. He says, “today the beauty and the power of science are not just unappreciated but bitterly resented. The disdain for science may be found in surprising quarters: not just among religious fundamentalists and know-nothing politicians, but among many of our most adored intellectuals and our most august institutions of higher learning.”

Pinker goes on to lament the divide that exists between science and the humanities. He states, “in the liberal arts curricula of many universities, students can graduate with just a trifling exposure to science, and what they do learn is often designed to poison them against it.” We also hear a lot about the STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and mathematics). Funding, particularly from industrial, commercial, and financial sources, is being directed mainly toward the STEM subjects at the neglect of the humanities. Pinker stresses that well-rounded people should have some knowledge and an appreciation of both the sciences and the humanities, and that there should be no conflict between the two. Both sides should work together for the benefit of everyone.

The last words of the chapter on science are: “The spirit of science is the spirit of the Enlightenment.”

Humanism – What is humanism? A simple definition is, “Being good without God.” This is a good starting point, and throughout his book Pinker acknowledges the desirability of living in a secular society where God is put in the background (separation of church and state) or eliminated altogether. But for Pinker, humanism is much more than that. He describes it as:

The goal of maximizing human flourishing - life, health, happiness, freedom, knowledge, love, richness of experience – may be called humanism.

I was pleased to read Pinker’s wider definition of humanism because when I joined the London humanist group some 15 years ago, I thought being a humanist was simply rejecting belief in God, adhering to stated humanist principles, and belonging to a humanist association. Then I began to realize that there were very few people who were card-carrying humanists. Why were more people not interested in joining a humanist group? Apparently, humanists are terrible marketers. They have never been able to attract the number of people required to create a critical mass that would be recognized and listened to by the general public, the media and politicians.

In his recent book, *How to Be A Stoic*, Massimo Pigliucci comments on the lack of members in humanist associations. He states, “despite the best efforts of supporters in secular humanist organizations, their humanism comes across as cold. Hence, I think, their lack of success, numerically speaking.” Pigliucci was raised a Catholic, became an atheist in his teens, later a humanist, and then a Stoic. He found something in Stoicism that was lacking in humanism. Apparently, many others have also found humanist associations do not provide what they are looking for.

The first inkling I got that humanism was not just being a non-believer and adhering to the principles of humanist organizations, was when I read Yuval Harari’s book *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*. While never mentioning humanist organizations, he describes liberal humanism as living in a society in which “humanity is a conglomeration of individual humans where the liberty of each individual is sacrosanct.” In other words, humanists are people living in a society in which the well-being of each individual human is of prime importance, or as Pinker puts it, a society where each individual human is free and able to live a flourishing life. Thus, the majority of people living in such a society are humanists, but do not know it or rarely think about it that way. Western liberal social democracies after WW II with low inequality and adequate social safety nets, provided the necessary environment for humanism to flourish. This is in contrast to theological societies where God, rather than the individual human, is at the centre of things.

For Pinker, an essential characteristic of a humanistic society is a firm separation of church and state. He notes that in most Western liberal democracies religion and belief in God tends to naturally fade away. In fact, he points out that the world's fastest growing religion is no religion at all, and that irreligion is a natural consequence of affluence and education. In fact, recent studies confirm wealthier and better educated countries tend to be less religious. Even in the U.S., the most religious of the Western democracies, the "Nones," who tick "No Religion" on census forms, have risen from 5% in 1972 to 25% today, and among Millennials, 39% are Nones.

And then there is the question of morality. Religious people often claim that it is necessary to be religious to be moral. This claim can, of course, be easily refuted because it is known that citizens in countries with low religiosity are often more law abiding than those in countries with high religiosity.

Readers will have noted that the phrase "liberal democracy" comes up over and over when referring to countries adhering to humanistic Enlightenment values. Communist countries immediately come to mind as not being democratic, but Pinker seems less concerned about communist countries and focuses instead on theocratic Islamic countries. In the book, he devotes over four pages to problematic Islam, which he says cannot be ignored in any discussion on human progress.

Prior to the Enlightenment, Islamic countries were internally peaceful and ahead of Western countries in areas of mathematics and science, at a time when Christian countries were engaging in crusades, inquisitions, and religious wars. But as Christianity reformed and advanced, Islam stagnated. Today Sunni and Shia Muslims are fighting religious wars, and radical Islamists are engaging in Jihad with terrorists threatening Western civilians. And most unfortunately, the extreme barbaric practices of Sharia Law are being carried out in some Islamic countries. Yes, Islam needs to go through a reformation as did Christianity, and only moderate Muslims can initiate reform, but unfortunately reform is nowhere in sight. In the meantime, as Pinker states above, the threats of the radicals cannot be ignored.

In conclusion, it is necessary to question the book's title, *Enlightenment Now*. Pinker quite expertly portrays the amazing progress humans have brought about since the dawn of the Enlightenment and how all the Enlightenment values finally came together for Western democracies after the end of WW II. From the mid-forties until the mid-seventies, there was a prosperous period like no other before, as a strong middle class emerged and inequality was at an all-time low. But things began to fall apart in the U.S. as regulations on financial institutions were relaxed, taxes for the wealthy were reduced, and adequate social safety nets were not provided, in contrast to other Western countries. Inequality increased as wealth concentrated in the 1%, while populism crept in and Donald Trump was elected president, creating a White House that is being described as chaotic.

It is in this chaotic environment that Pinker calls for a return to *Enlightenment Now*, without suggesting how it might come about. He says optimistically that "there is no limit to the betterment we can attain if we continue to apply knowledge to enhance human flourishing." He says, "I am not an optimist. I'm a very serious possibilist." I think he is underestimating human greed and the uncertainty that lies in the future as the Digital Revolution surges ahead. Recently I read an article entitled "How the Enlightenment Ends," describing the unknown future effects of Artificial Intelligence (AI). Scary stuff indeed, begging the question: Will humans be able to use the new developments as a means for enhancing human flourishing for all, or will inequality be the norm? This is the challenge humanity faces now. (DAH).

A Few Concluding Thoughts

Having read both *Sapiens* and *Enlightenment Now*, I feel I am in a position to offer a few thoughts on the evolution of civilization and humanity. About 70,000 years ago, the Sapiens brain had evolved close to the state that it is now. For about 60,000 years humans lived in small egalitarian groups as hunter gatherers without the need for a hierarchy. After the Agricultural Revolution appeared on the scene about 10,000 years ago, early civilizations evolved as civic communities came into being and a hierarchy was necessary to maintain law and order, usually with a king at the top of the hierarchy. Under these conditions, about 90% of the population was required to labour on farms in order to feed the whole population. The remaining 10% consisted of the nobility, often under a king, as well as a merchant class. Under these conditions, 90% of the population lived in poverty until the advent of democracies in Europe and the United States during the last few hundred years of the second millennium, culminating in the period after the end of WW II when no more than 10% lived in poverty in democratic countries. The hopes of the philosophers and scholars of the Enlightenment prevailed.

The key here is the bottom-up rule of democracies versus the top-down rule of kingdoms or dictatorships. There are two famous statements outlining the essential characteristic of democracies. The first one quoted is by the Athenian Pericles and the second is by Abraham Lincoln in the Gettysburg Address:

1. *Our constitution is called a democracy, because power is in the hands of not a few, but the whole of the people.*
2. *This nation shall have a new birth – and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.*

Yes, it is the rule by the people in well-functioning democracies that has brought about conditions where inequality and poverty are at optimum lows and the well-being of all humans is paramount. But these conditions are now threatened as the middle class declines and inequality and poverty are increasing. The United States is really no longer a democracy, as Congress is controlled by big money, and a populist movement brought about the election of Donald Trump who would like to be an autocrat. And populism is increasing in other Western countries, threatening democracy. Then there are Russia and China, both attempting government by non-democratic rule. Can democracies survive? Perhaps only if wealth can be redistributed to reduce inequality and governments put the well-being of all members of their societies at the forefront. In other words, govern according to Enlightenment values.

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