

THE POVERTY OF PROGRESS

SHARE ARTICLE:



(<https://www.facebook.com/sharer/sharer.php?u=https://newint.org/features/2020/02/24/poverty-progress>)



(<https://twitter.com/intent/tweet?url=https://newint.org/features/2020/02/24/poverty-progress&via=newint&related=newint&text=The+poverty+of+progress>)



(<mailto:?subject=newint.org%3A%20The%20poverty%20of%20progress&body=Hi%2C%0A%0A%20wanted%20you%20to%20see%20progress%0A%0A%2A%2AThe%20poverty%20of%20progress%2A%2A%0A%0A%0D%0A%09Our%20understanding%20of%20progress%20owned%20journalism%3A%20https%3A%2F%2Fnewint.org%2Fmisc%2Fsupport-us%2F%0A>)

24 February 2020

[Capitalism \(/topic/Capitalism\)](#)

Our understanding of progress perpetuates poverty, inequality and climate change. **Martin Kirk and Alnoor Ladha** make the case for an essential shift.



‘Time is not an arrow relentlessly moving forward, but something circular and strange, more akin to a lake in which the past, present and future exist.’

This quote from biologist Robin Will Kimmerer, author of *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*, contradicts one of the core metaphors and beliefs of Western culture stemming from the

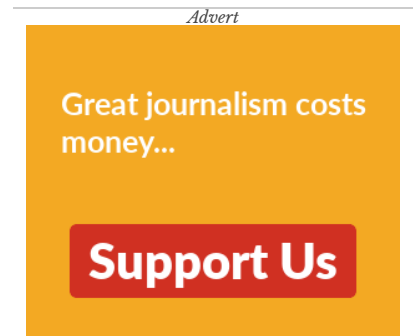
Enlightenment ; namely that progress is an arrow and that it represents our collective trajectory moving inexorably in one direction, from worse to better. The consequence of this logic is the delusion that we are always at the peak of this ascending arrow; beneficiaries of a culture that moves us ever towards the height of civilization.

A new variant of this perpetual progress narrative has been taking root in popular culture under the banner of New Optimism. Despite all the upheavals we see around us today, this narrative suggests, we are doing better as a species than ever before. Violence is down, poverty is decreasing, health and wealth are on the rise, and these gains are seen across the surface of the planet. Two of the most well-known proponents of this narrative are Harvard linguist Steven Pinker and tech billionaire Bill Gates.

We do not have to adhere to the old rules of infinite economic growth, perpetual war, competition, extraction, selfishness and hyper-consumption. We can imagine something different, something better

The core question at hand is whether or not our current moment, when seen holistically and in the long arc of history, actually validates this narrative?

If you scratch beneath the surface of the New Optimists' claims, you find a lot of statistical smoke and mirrors. As economic anthropologist Jason Hickel, a prominent critic of this position, [has shown](https://www.jasonhickel.org/blog/2019/2/3/pinker-and-global-poverty) (<https://www.jasonhickel.org/blog/2019/2/3/pinker-and-global-poverty>), the story they tell about poverty relies on a definition that is woefully inadequate; far below what is needed for basic health and nutrition let alone human dignity. The measure they use is the World Bank's arbitrary \$1.90 a day International Poverty Line, which even the bank itself admits is too low to inform policy.



(<https://ead.newint.org/click.php?id=7>)

If we measure poverty at \$7.40 a day, which scholars say is a [more meaningful threshold](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jan/29/bill-gates-davos-global-poverty-infographic-neoliberal) (<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jan/29/bill-gates-davos-global-poverty-infographic-neoliberal>), a more accurate picture is revealed: nearly 55 per cent of humanity – some 4.2 billion people – are living in poverty today. Using the same World Bank data, this means that the number of people living in poverty has increased by roughly one billion from 1981. A similar story [applies to global hunger](https://www.academia.edu/21593862/The_True_Extent_of_Global_Poverty_and_Hunger_Questioning_the_Good_News_Narrative_of_the_Millennium_Development_Goals) (https://www.academia.edu/21593862/The_True_Extent_of_Global_Poverty_and_Hunger_Questioning_the_Good_News_Narrative_of_the_Millennium_Development_Goals).

However, the true weakness of New Optimism is not just its statistical underpinnings, as shaky as they are; it is the very scope of the narrative itself. It is partial, incomplete, and remarkably selective. To maintain optimism at such a pitch, one must deny reality itself.

IGNORING WHAT MATTERS

The facts on human-generated climate change and ecological destruction are hard to face: humanity has wiped out [60 per cent of global wildlife](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/oct/30/humanity-wiped-out-animals-since-1970-major-report-finds) (<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/oct/30/humanity-wiped-out-animals-since-1970-major-report-finds>) since 1970. Insect populations, upon which so much other life depends, are [plummeting all over the world](https://www.laboratoryequipment.com/article/2019/02/insect-die-worldwide-loss-40-percent-species-predicted) (<https://www.laboratoryequipment.com/article/2019/02/insect-die-worldwide-loss-40-percent-species-predicted>).

[Forty per cent of phytoplankton](https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/phytoplankton-population/) (<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/phytoplankton-population/>), which is the base of the ocean food system, has been destroyed in the last 50 years. [Antarctic ice loss](https://www.washingtonpost.com/environment/2019/01/14/ice-loss-antarctica-has-sextupled-since-s-new-research-finds/?utm_term=.2f2fbf1ef6fb) (https://www.washingtonpost.com/environment/2019/01/14/ice-loss-antarctica-has-sextupled-since-s-new-research-finds/?utm_term=.2f2fbf1ef6fb), a main predictor of sea level rise, has sextupled in the same period. And, of course, we are now routinely witnessing the [hot](https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/july-2019-hottest-month-ever-866436/) (<https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/july-2019-hottest-month-ever-866436/>) [test months in recorded history](https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/july-2019-hottest-month-ever-866436/) (<https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/july-2019-hottest-month-ever-866436/>).

Advert

Current projections for global temperature spikes have us on a path to a [4-degree centigrade rise](https://www.independent.co.uk/environment/global-warming-temperature-rise-climate-change-end-century-science-a8095591.html) (<https://www.independent.co.uk/environment/global-warming-temperature-rise-climate-change-end-century-science-a8095591.html>) this century. This means a vastly different world. Forget about ending poverty, a 4-degree rise threatens



organized human life as we know it. 2018 saw a record high in global carbon emissions (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ica-emissions-idUSKCN1R7005>). We are not only not dealing with the acute threat in front of us, we are pushing ever harder on the accelerator.

POLITICAL VERSUS PHYSICAL REALITY

It seems that there are two competing realities: human political reality, measured by GDP, where progress marches forward in one direction, and physical reality, measured by things like the functional health of ecosystems, which points towards existential ruin. Right now, the former must ignore the latter to maintain coherence. (<https://ead.newint.org/click.php?id=8>)

The starting point for any attempt to reconcile these two realities is to understand the logic of the system itself. Capitalism, as its name suggests, is programmed with one primary goal: to create more capital. It has some scope to care about other things, but nowhere near as much as it cares about generating capital.

Just look at the language. For mainstream, classical economists – still the high priests of public policy – everything that is not a part of the immediate machine of GDP growth, including the environment, is called an ‘externality’; something outside of the system. Of course, the opposite is true. Nature is not *external* to the economy, it is the Mother System. It is the casing, the context, the source and regulator of life itself. The economy is a subset of Nature, and must, by the laws of physics, operate within its bounds.

Recognizing these bounds is where physical reality hits up hard against political reality. In a reductive political reality, there is no meaningful way to register the destruction of old growth forests, mothers’ care for their children, the extinction of species, or the emotional and spiritual weight of losing one’s ancestral home or culture. In short, as Robert Kennedy said, ‘[GDP] measures everything except that which is worthwhile’.

At this stage, one cannot, in any practical sense, be motivated to prioritize perpetual and infinite growth in the supply of capital and simultaneously claim to be addressing the causes of ecological breakdown. For the simple reason that the former is the primary cause of the latter

THE PROBLEM OF MIXED MOTIVATIONS

In the face of such a stark reality, how could the New Optimists be so adamant about their delusions? We are dealing with what philosophers call a ‘mixed-motivation problem’ where multiple moral impulses (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-motivation/>) occur at the same time. It is difficult to separate any primary motivation in the midst of a multitude of drivers.

On the one hand, for the net beneficiaries of capitalism – many millions of people – there is a self-evident and personally verifiable logic in the idea that this system is delivering progress. All many of us need to do is think back a generation or two, through the lens of material comfort to confirm that there has indeed been a significant increase in our quality of life. From here it is an imperceptible step to presuming three things.

Firstly, that these gains are universal and happening across the board. Secondly, that this system is the pinnacle of human achievement, something for which, to resurrect Margaret Thatcher’s infamous line, ‘there is no alternative’. And finally, that the current order must therefore continue as it has been. Anything else would feel as if it contravenes some law of Nature.

On the other hand, there is the broad interest – of everyone and everything constituting the web of life on Earth. This is measured in biodiversity, ecosystem stability and overall health, the regenerative capacities of the planet, the ability to sustain complex life, etc. All but true sociopaths and the terminally deluded experience concern for this, one would hope. Including Bill Gates and Steven Pinker.

The problem is that these two interests have become effectively mutually exclusive. Had we recognized and grappled with these profound contradictions some generations ago, we may have found a way to grow wealth in ecologically neutral ways from the outset. However, we chose a different path and now face genuine existential risk.

At this stage, one cannot, in any practical sense, be motivated to prioritize perpetual and infinite growth in the supply of capital and simultaneously claim to be addressing the causes of ecological breakdown. For the simple reason that the former *is* the primary cause of the latter.

This is the brute reality of capitalism that the New Optimists have no way to reconcile, and as a result, largely ignore. Like the excellent capitalists they are, they adhere to its primary logic that more capital, however it is generated and distributed, is a proxy for an improving world.

There is another important factor that blinds the biggest beneficiaries of capitalism from seeing its true nature: the current order validates their position in the moral hierarchy. If the world is getting better, it is largely because of people like Pinker and Gates – rational, educated, liberal-minded – therefore those who exemplify these attributes deserve the exploits of playing the game well. Especially if they have convinced themselves they are bringing the rest of us with them.

One can feel the identity-affirming power of such an idea. There is no need for these lords of capital to feel implicated in our civilizational and ecological crises. Especially when mainstream culture reifies their financial success as the sole arbiter of life success and tells us that private enterprise drives progress. By this logic, they should be thanked for all they have done and are doing.

‘
An important factor blinds the biggest beneficiaries of capitalism from seeing its true nature – the current order validates their position in the moral hierarchy

Privilege – received or perceived – is thus a powerfully blinding constraint, especially in a world that feels unstable. Capitalism makes moral heroes of those that promote its ‘capital above all else’ logic. At the same time, it teaches the rest of us to be atomized individuals, whose salvation lies in acquisition and consumption, and whose response to crises is to place us and ours first and foremost.

Slogans such as ‘America First’ articulate this xenophobic impulse. Given the dominant capitalist logic we all swim in, is it any wonder that we are witnessing a tide of authoritarianism, the resurgence of building walls and barriers, the deepening separation between rich and poor?

COMPLACENCY KILLS, BUT SO DOES OPTIMISM

Before we get too glib about its shadow side, it’s important to recognize that there is a powerful psychological impulse behind the New Optimism narrative.

There is a part of all of us – in many ways a very good part – that does not want to believe in the consequences of our actions, ecological or otherwise. Not only because we want to avoid our deepest fears of catastrophe, but also because we really *want* to believe that things are getting better for everyone. The New Optimist narrative exploits this innate need for fairness, comfort, and stability. It is our lullaby and our alibi.

James Stockdale, a senior US naval officer who was held captive in Vietnam for seven years during the war, articulated this in what has come to be known as the [Stockdale Paradox](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Stockdale%23The_Stockdale_Paradox) (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Stockdale%23The_Stockdale_Paradox): either too much optimism or too much pessimism can destroy the mental resilience required to endure life-threatening circumstances. If we accept that everything is going as planned, if the arrow of progress is carrying us all with it, then we have little incentive to change or to re-imagine the economy.

‘
The New Optimist narrative exploits our innate need for fairness, comfort, and stability. It is our lullaby and our alibi

To have any hope of bringing the ideal of optimism back to life, we must acknowledge, somewhat ironically for Messrs Pinker and Gates, that the arc of justice requires us to sweep past capitalism, rather than lean into it as they propose. It’s not a little off-track; it is unfit for purpose. We have to face the reality that capitalism is actively creating poverty, inequality and climate change. It does not need tweaking; it needs overhauling at the level of fundamentals.

You can choose to see this as a disappointment or as a source of profound freedom. We do not have to adhere to the old rules of infinite economic growth, perpetual war, competition, extraction, selfishness and hyper-consumption. We can imagine something different, something better.

It means we can and must go beyond 'sustainable development' into a regenerative future. It means transcending the anthropocentric worldview towards one that's more holistic, one that includes multi-species flourishing. It means recoding our economic logic from the ground up, dramatically tempering the logic that all aspects of the economy must grow all the time.

It means leap-frogging scarcity logic and ushering in ideas like relocalising our economies and making them as resilient (i.e. as self-sufficient) as possible; developing zero-waste, circular production systems; adopting holistic measures of progress to replace the one-dimensional, reductive logic of GDP; a [universal basic income](https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2017/mar/04/basic-income-birthright-eliminating-poverty) (<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2017/mar/04/basic-income-birthright-eliminating-poverty>) that provides a floor beneath which we will not allow our fellows humans to drop, [fair trade rules](https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/wto-20-years-battle-seattle-191127105414387.html) (<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/wto-20-years-battle-seattle-191127105414387.html>), [shorter working weeks](https://neweconomics.org/campaigns/shorter-working-week) (<https://neweconomics.org/campaigns/shorter-working-week>), [closing down tax havens & secrecy jurisdictions](https://progressive.org/op-eds/its-time-to-shut-down-tax-havens-galant-190213/) (<https://progressive.org/op-eds/its-time-to-shut-down-tax-havens-galant-190213/>), and [levying taxes on extreme wealth](https://boingboing.net/2019/02/12/81-pct-estate-tax-in-1980.html) (<https://boingboing.net/2019/02/12/81-pct-estate-tax-in-1980.html>). In short, we need to localize, circularise and humanize economic systems.

Whatever the pathways forward, we will only get there by acknowledging the primacy of physical reality, with the full spectrum of information at hand. To see things as they are does not make us pessimistic or unpatriotic or ungrateful. It makes us worthy heirs of the endowments that have been entrusted to us. It creates the context for meaningful structural change, for ideas that transmute the very DNA of our dying system in order to create a culture that reflects the values of the world's majority and of life itself. Now that is reason for optimism.

Martin Kirk and Alnoor Ladha were co-founders of [The Rules](http://www.therules.org/) (<http://www.therules.org/>), a global network of activists, researchers, writers, coders and others focused on addressing the root causes of inequality, poverty and climate change.

HELP US PRODUCE MORE LIKE THIS



Patreon is a platform that enables us to offer more to our readership. With a new podcast, eBooks, tote bags and magazine subscriptions on offer, as well as early access to video and articles, we're very excited about our Patreon! If you're not on board yet then check it out [here](https://www.patreon.com/newint?utm_medium=ni-www&utm_source=article_end_patreon_button).

Support us » (https://www.patreon.com/newint?utm_medium=ni-www&utm_source=article_end_patreon_button)

RELATED ARTICLES



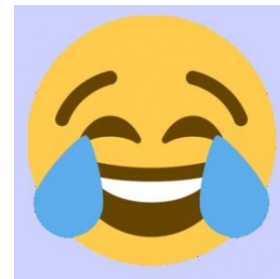
(</features/2019/07/01/long-read-progress-and-its-discontents>).



(</immersive/2018/11/27/how-finance-capital-ruined-london>).



(</features/2018/11/23/movement-replacing-ads-anti-capitalism>).



(</features/2018/01/01/social-media-mental-health>).
LAUGHING AND CRYING ONLINE
(</features/2018/01/01/social-media>

(</blog/2017/11/maori-talk>).

COP'S TALKFEST IS THE
COPOUT (</blog/2017/11>

PROGRESS AND ITS DISCONTENTS

(/FEATURES/2019/07/01/LONG-READ-

PROGRESS-AND-ITS-DISCONTENTS)

According to Bill Gates, Steven Pinker and the like, the world has never been better and global poverty is shrinking. Jason...

(/features/2019/07/01/long-read-progress-and-its-discontents)

HOW FINANCE CAPITAL RUINED LONDON

(/IMMERSIVE/2018/11/27/HOW-FINANCE-

CAPITAL-RUINED-LONDON)

Alienation and empire in the Big Smoke. An interview with photographer and writer Lewis Bush by Husna Rizvi.

(/immersive/2018/11/27/how-finance-capital-ruined-london)

THE MOVEMENT REPLACING ADS WITH

ANTI-CAPITALISM

(/FEATURES/2018/11/23/MOVEMENT-

REPLACING-ADS-ANTI-CAPITALISM)

Alessio Perrone reports on a new campaign of seizing ad space to impose powerful critiques of capitalism.
(/features/2018/11/23/movement-replacing-ads-anti-capitalism)

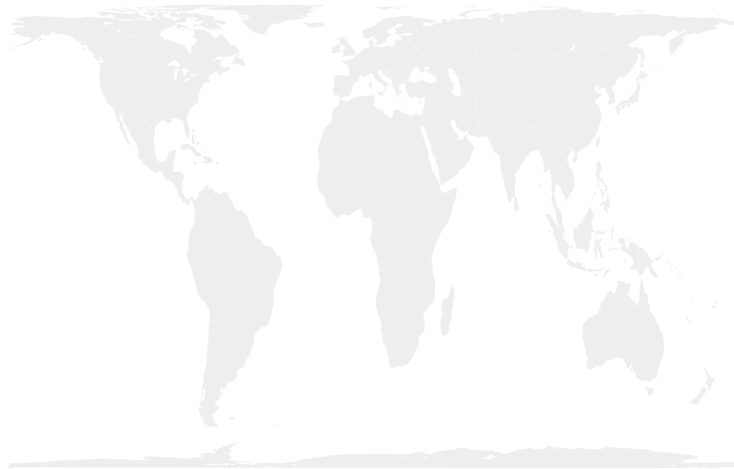
MENTAL-HEALTH)

Social media use is correlated with mental health problems. But is it simply cause and effect? Marcus Gilroy-Ware finds out.
(/features/2018/01/01/social-media-mental-health)

TALK)

Climate conference words and no action. Māori activist Nā Thomas Pene.
(/blog/2017/11/maori-talk)

EXPLORE YOUR PASSIONS BY TOPIC AND REGION



Climate (/topic/Climate) Democracy (/topic/Democracy) Economics (/topic/Economics)
Technology (/topic/Technology) Human Rights (/topic/Human Rights) Migration (/topic/Migration)
Minorities (/topic/Minorities) War & Peace (/topic/War & Peace)

About (/about)
Jobs (/about/jobs/)
Privacy (/about/privacy/)
Policies (/about/policies/)
Complaints (/about/complaints/)
Contact (/contact)



(<https://twitter.com/newint>)



(<https://www.facebook.com/newint>)



(<https://www.instagram.com/newinternationalist>)



([plain-rss.xml](#))