



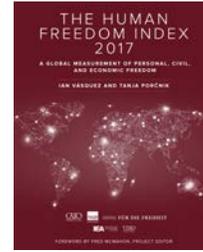
TED LIEU

On ending warrantless surveillance
PAGE 12



CLARE GARVIE

The alarming rise of face recognition
PAGE 9



HUMAN FREEDOM INDEX

Who's the freest of them all?
PAGE 3

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How the Enlightenment Gave Us Peace, Prosperity, and Progress

BY STEVEN PINKER

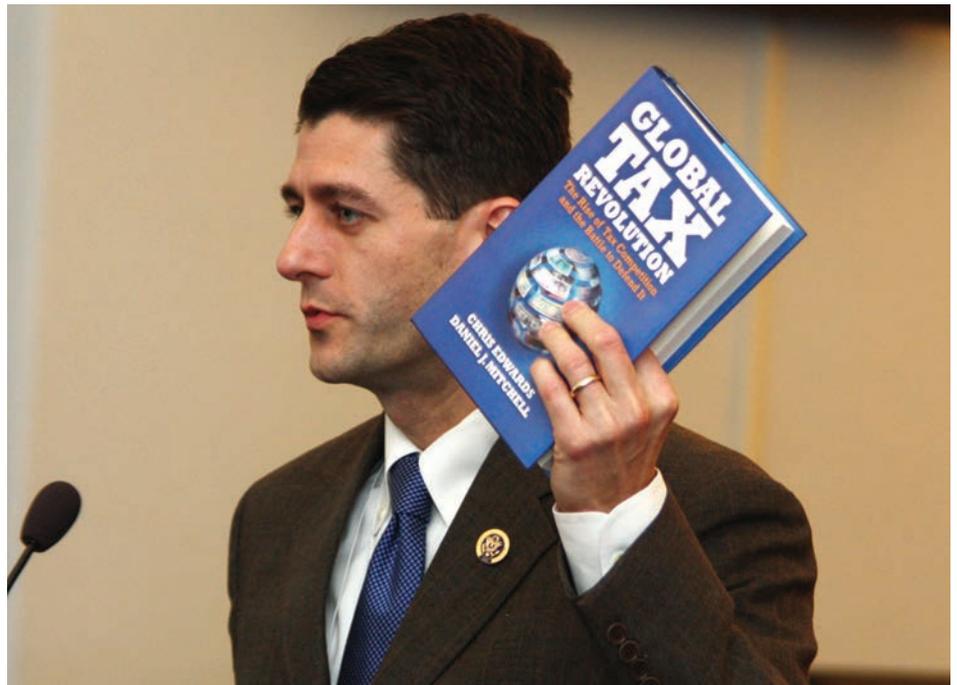
The Enlightenment principle that we can apply reason and sympathy to enhance human flourishing may seem obvious, trite, old-fashioned. But it is not. More than ever, the ideals of reason, science, humanism, and progress need a wholehearted defense. We take its gifts for granted: newborns who will live more than eight decades, markets overflowing with food, clean water that appears with a flick of a finger and waste that disappears with another, pills that erase a painful infection, sons who are not sent off to war, daughters who can walk the streets in safety, critics of the powerful who are not jailed or shot, the world's knowledge and culture available in a shirt pocket. But these are human accomplishments, not cosmic birthrights. In the memories of many readers—and in the experience of those in less fortunate parts of the world—war, scarcity, disease, ignorance, and lethal menace are a

natural part of existence. We know that countries can slide back into these primitive conditions, and so we ignore the achievements of the Enlightenment at our peril.

The ideals of the Enlightenment are products of human reason, but they always

struggle with other strands of human nature: loyalty to tribe, deference to authority, magical thinking, the blaming of misfortune on evil-doers. The second decade of the 21st century has seen the rise of political movements

Continued on page 6



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In 2008, PAUL RYAN, then ranking member of the House Budget Committee, praised Chris Edwards and Dan Mitchell's Cato book *Global Tax Revolution*, declaring that "if you haven't read this book, you should." Ten years later, Congress has adopted some of the book's key recommendations. See page 16.

Continued from page 1

that depict their countries as being pulled into a hellish dystopia by malign factions that can be resisted only by a strong leader who wrenches the country backward to make it “great again.” These movements have been abetted by a narrative shared by many of their fiercest opponents, in which the institutions of modernity have failed and every aspect of life is in deepening crisis—the two sides in macabre agreement that wrecking those institutions will make the world a better place. Harder to find is a positive vision that sees the world’s problems against a background of progress that it seeks to build upon by solving those problems in their turn.

Reflecting on liberal ideals in 1960, not long after they had withstood their greatest trial, the economist F. A. Hayek observed, “If old truths are to retain their hold on men’s minds, they must be restated in the language and concepts of successive generations” (inadvertently proving his point with the expression *men’s minds*). “What at one time are their most effective expressions gradually become so worn with use that they cease to carry a definite meaning. The underlying ideas may be as valid as ever, but the words, even when they refer to problems that are still with us, no longer convey the same conviction.”

DARE TO UNDERSTAND

The Enlightenment has *worked*—perhaps the greatest story seldom told. And because this triumph is so unsung, the underlying ideals of reason, science, and humanism are unappreciated as well. Far from being an insipid consensus, these ideals are treated by today’s intellectuals with indifference, skepticism, and sometimes contempt. When properly appreciated, I will suggest, the ideals of the Enlightenment are in fact stirring, inspiring, and noble.

What is enlightenment? In a 1784 essay with that question as its title, Immanuel Kant answered that it consists of “humankind’s

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emergence from its self-incurred immaturity,” its “lazy and cowardly” submission to the “dogmas and formulas” of religious or political authority. Enlightenment’s motto, he proclaimed, is “Dare to understand!” and its foundational demand is freedom of thought and speech.

What is *the* Enlightenment? There is no official answer, because the era named by Kant’s essay was never demarcated by opening and closing ceremonies like the Olympics, nor are its tenets stipulated in an oath or creed. The Enlightenment is conventionally placed in the last two-thirds of the 18th century, though it flowed out of the Scientific Revolution and the Age of Reason in the 17th century and spilled into the heyday of classical liberalism of the first half of the 19th. The era was a cornucopia of ideas, some of them contradictory, but four themes tie them together: reason, science, humanism, and progress.

Foremost is reason. Reason is nonnegotiable. As soon as you show up to discuss the question of what we should live for (or any other question), as long as you insist that your answers, whatever they are, are reasonable or justified or true and that therefore other people ought to believe them too, then you have committed yourself to reason, and to holding your beliefs accountable to objective standards.

Many writers today confuse the Enlightenment endorsement of reason with the implausible claim that humans are perfectly rational agents. Nothing could be further

from historical reality. Thinkers such as Kant, Baruch Spinoza, Thomas Hobbes, David Hume, and Adam Smith were inquisitive psychologists and all too aware of our irrational passions and foibles. The deliberate application of reason was necessary precisely because our common habits of thought are not particularly reasonable.

That leads to the second ideal, science, the refining of reason to understand the world. The Scientific Revolution was revolutionary in a way that is hard to appreciate today, now that its discoveries have become second nature to most of us.

To the Enlightenment thinkers, the escape from ignorance and superstition showed how mistaken our conventional wisdom could be, and how the methods of science—skepticism, fallibilism, open debate, and empirical testing—are a paradigm of how to achieve reliable knowledge.

That knowledge includes an understanding of ourselves. The need for a “science of man” was a theme that tied together Enlightenment thinkers who disagreed about much else. Their belief that there was such a thing as universal human nature, and that it could be studied scientifically, made them precocious practitioners of sciences that would be named only centuries later.

The idea of a universal human nature brings us to a third theme, humanism. The thinkers of the Age of Reason and the Enlightenment saw an urgent need for a secular foundation for morality, because they were haunted by a historical memory of centuries of religious carnage: the Crusades, the Inquisition, witch hunts, the European wars of religion. They laid that foundation in what we now call humanism, which privileges the well-being of individual men, women, and children over the glory of the tribe, race, nation, or religion. It is individuals, not groups, who are *sentient*—who feel pleasure and pain, fulfillment and anguish.

A humanistic sensibility impelled the Enlightenment thinkers to condemn not just religious violence but also the secular

cruelties of their age, including slavery, despotism, executions for frivolous offenses such as shoplifting and poaching, and sadistic punishments such as flogging, amputation, impalement, disembowelment, breaking on the wheel, and burning at the stake.

If the abolition of slavery and cruel punishment is not progress, nothing is, which brings us to the fourth Enlightenment ideal. With our understanding of the world advanced by science and our circle of sympathy expanded through reason and cosmopolitanism, humanity could make intellectual and moral progress.

The ideal of progress should not be confused with the 20th-century movement to re-engineer society for the convenience of technocrats and planners, which the political scientist James Scott calls Authoritarian High Modernism. Rather than trying to shape human nature, the Enlightenment hope for progress was concentrated on human institutions. Human-made systems such as governments, laws, schools, markets, and international bodies are a natural target for the application of reason to human betterment.

In this way of thinking, government is not a divine fiat to reign, a synonym for “society,” or an avatar of the national, religious, or racial soul. It is a human invention, tacitly agreed to in a social contract, designed to enhance the welfare of citizens by coordinating their behavior and discouraging selfish acts that may be tempting to every individual but leave everyone worse off. As the most famous product of the Enlightenment, the Declaration of Independence, put it, in order to secure the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, governments are instituted among people, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.

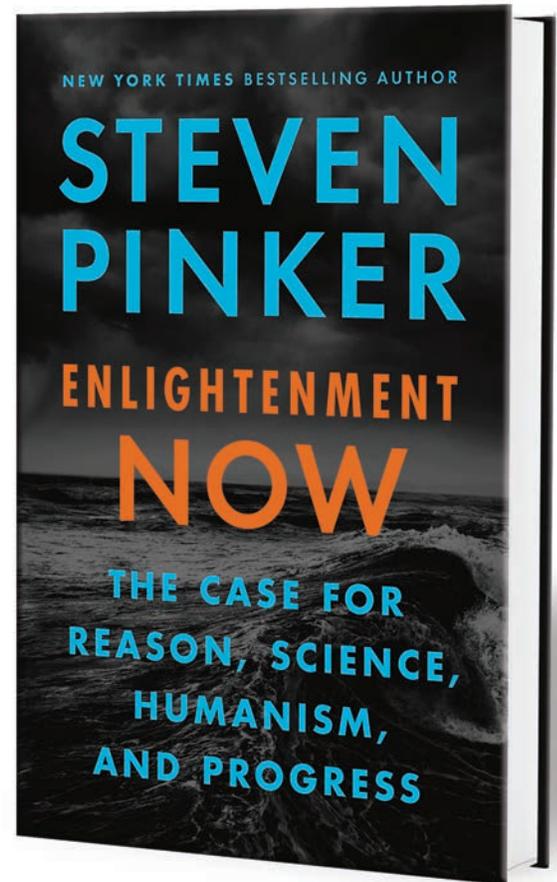
PEACE AND PROSPERITY

The Enlightenment also saw the first rational analysis of prosperity. Its starting point was not how wealth is distributed but the prior question of how wealth comes to exist in the first place. Smith, building on

French, Dutch, and Scottish influences, noted that an abundance of useful stuff cannot be conjured into existence by a farmer or craftsman working in isolation. It depends on a network of specialists, each of whom learns how to make something as efficiently as possible, and who combine and exchange the fruits of their ingenuity, skill, and labor.

Specialization works only in a market that allows the specialists to exchange their goods and services, and Smith explained that economic activity was a form of mutually beneficial cooperation (a positive-sum game, in today’s lingo): each gets back something that is more valuable to him than what he gives up. Through voluntary exchange, people benefit others by benefiting themselves; as he wrote, “It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love.” Smith was not saying that people are ruthlessly selfish, or that they ought to be; he was one of history’s keenest commentators on human sympathy. He only said that in a market, whatever tendency people have to care for their families and themselves can work to the good of all.

Exchange can make an entire society not just richer but nicer, because in an effective market it is cheaper to buy things than to steal them, and other people are more valuable to you alive than dead. (As the economist Ludwig von Mises put it centuries later, “If the tailor goes to war against the baker, he must henceforth bake his own bread.”) Many Enlightenment thinkers, including Montesquieu, Kant, Voltaire, Diderot, and the Abbé de Saint-Pierre, endorsed the ideal of *doux commerce*, gentle commerce. The American



Founders—George Washington, James Madison, and especially Alexander Hamilton—designed the institutions of the young nation to nurture it.

This brings us to another Enlightenment ideal, peace. War was so common in history that it was natural to see it as a permanent part of the human condition and to think peace could come only in a messianic age. But with the advent of the Enlightenment, war was no longer thought of as a divine punishment to be endured and deplored, or a glorious contest to be won and celebrated, but as a practical problem to be mitigated and someday solved. In “Perpetual Peace,” Kant laid out measures that would discourage leaders from dragging their countries into war. Together with international commerce, he recommended representative republics (what we would call democracies), mutual transparency, norms against conquest and internal interference, freedom of travel and immigration, and a federation of states that

would adjudicate disputes between them.

For all the prescience of the Founders, Framers, and *philosophes*, this is not a book of Enlightenolatry. The Enlightenment thinkers were men and women of their age, the 18th century. Some were racists, sexists, anti-Semites, slaveholders, or duelists. They of all people would have been the first to concede this. If you extol reason, then what matters is the integrity of the thoughts, not the personalities of the thinkers. And if you're committed to progress, you can't very well claim to have it all figured out.

PROGRESSOPHOBIA

Intellectuals hate progress. Intellectuals who call themselves “progressive” *really* hate progress. It's not that they hate the *fruits* of progress, mind you: most pundits, critics, and their *bien pensant* readers use computers rather than quills and inkwells, and they prefer to have their surgery with anesthesia rather than without it. It's the *idea* of progress that rankles the chattering class—the Enlightenment belief that by understanding the world we can improve the human condition.

The idea that the world is better than it was and can get better still fell out of fashion among the clerisy long ago. In *The Idea of Decline in Western History*, Arthur Herman shows that prophets of doom are the all-stars of the liberal arts curriculum, including Nietzsche, Arthur Schopenhauer, Martin Heidegger, and a chorus of eco-pessimists. In *History of the Idea of Progress* (1980), the sociologist Robert Nisbet agreed: “The skepticism regarding Western progress that was once confined to a very small number of intellectuals in the nineteenth century has grown and spread to not merely the large majority of intellectuals in this final quarter of the century, but to many millions of other people in the West.”

But it's not just those who intellectualize for a living who think the world is going to hell in a handcart. It's ordinary people when they switch into intellectualizing mode. In late 2015, large majorities in 11 developed

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countries said that “the world is getting worse,” and in most of the last 40 years a solid majority of Americans have said that the country is “heading in the wrong direction.”

It's easy to see why people feel that way: every day the news is filled with stories about war, terrorism, crime, pollution, inequality, drug abuse, and oppression. Seeing how journalistic habits and cognitive biases bring out the worst in each other, how can we soundly appraise the state of the world? The answer is to *count*.

Most people agree that life is better than death. Health is better than sickness. Sustenance is better than hunger. Abundance is better than poverty. Peace is better than war. Safety is better than danger. Freedom is better than tyranny. Equal rights are better than bigotry and discrimination. Literacy is better than illiteracy. Knowledge is better than ignorance. Intelligence is better than dull-wittedness. Happiness is better than misery. Opportunities to enjoy family, friends, culture, and nature are better than drudgery and monotony.

All these things can be measured. If they have increased over time, that is progress.

Granted, not everyone would agree on the exact list. The values are avowedly humanistic and leave out religious, romantic, and aristocratic virtues such as salvation, grace, sacredness, heroism, honor, glory, and authenticity. But most would agree that it's a necessary start.

THE SHOCKING TRUTH

And here is a shocker: *The world has made spectacular progress in every single measure of human well-being*. Here is a second shocker: *Almost no one knows about it*.

Information about human progress,

though absent from major news outlets and intellectual forums, is easy enough to find. The data are not entombed in dry reports but are displayed in gorgeous websites, particularly Max Roser's *Our World in Data*, Marian Tupy's *Human Progress*, and Hans Rosling's *Gapminder*. (Rosling learned that not even swallowing a sword during a 2007 TED talk was enough to get the world's attention.) The case has been made in beautifully written books, some by Nobel laureates, which flaunt the news in their titles—*Progress*, *The Progress Paradox*, *Infinite Progress*, *The Infinite Resource*, *The Rational Optimist*, *The Case for Rational Optimism*, *Utopia for Realists*, *Mass Flourishing*, *Abundance*, *The Improving State of the World*, *Getting Better*, *The End of Doom*, *The Moral Arc*, *The Big Ratchet*, *The Great Escape*, *The Great Surge*, *The Great Convergence*. (None was recognized with a major prize, but over the period in which they appeared, Pulitzers in nonfiction were given to four books on genocide, three on terrorism, two on cancer, two on racism, and one on extinction.) And for those whose reading habits tend toward listicles, recent years have offered “Five Amazing Pieces of Good News Nobody Is Reporting,” “Five Reasons Why 2013 Was the Best Year in Human History,” “Seven Reasons the World Looks Worse Than It Really Is,” “29 Charts and Maps That Show the World Is Getting Much, Much Better,” “40 Ways the World Is Getting Better,” and my favorite, “50 Reasons We're Living through the Greatest Period in World History.”

Perhaps President Obama summed it up best at the end of his presidency:

If you had to choose a moment in history to be born, and you did not know ahead of time who you would be—you didn't know whether you were going to be born into a wealthy family or a poor family, what country you'd be born in, whether you were going to be a man or a woman—if you had to choose blindly what moment you'd want to be born, you'd choose now. ■